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A NORTHERN LILY



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Five Years of an Eventful Life

BY

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CHAPTER XVI.

‘The father cracks of horses, pleughs, and kye,
The youngster’s artless heart o’erflows wi’ joy,
But, blate and laithfu’, scarce can weel behave ;
The mother, wi’ a woman’s wiles, can spy
What makes the youth sae bashfu’ and sae grave.’

A VARIETY of causes combined to detain David at Ardvoira, and he was now chafing with impatience to get away. Had it not been for the wise counsels of his friend Ponsonby, there is no saying what rash step he might not have taken.

Ponsonby was some years older than David, and far more a man of the world. He had studied for the bar in early life, and had gone a good deal into society in London. At that time he had met and fallen deeply in love with David’s cousin, Rosamond Mortimer, then a beautiful young girl in her first season. Her parents interfered to pre-

vent an engagement, but Ponsonby's affection was fully returned by the young lady herself, with whom he contrived to keep up a correspondence for some time; and she promised to wait, no matter how long, for him, while he worked to the utmost of his powers in order to realise a sufficient income to maintain a wife in comfort.

The following year he had gone on a walking tour on the Continent with David, just after the latter had passed his preliminary examination for Sandhurst, and on their return to England the first news which met Ponsonby's eye was the announcement in a society paper of a marriage shortly to take place between Sir Roger Seathwaite of Seathwaite Hall, Yorkshire, and Miss Rosamond Mortimer, eldest daughter of Sir Richard and Lady Mary Mortimer, of Wynchcombe, Devon. The letter which Ponsonby at once wrote to Rosamond was returned to him unopened, and very soon afterwards the marriage took place.

Ponsonby had never taken any real inter-

est in his profession, and after this blow he threw it up in disgust. He went to Rome and studied painting, for which he had considerable talent. Not long afterwards he unexpectedly succeeded to a fortune, which, though not large, might have enabled him to marry, had it come in time. And now he led a wandering and somewhat aimless life. He had met Rosamond several times in society since her marriage ; he knew that she was not happy with her husband, who was a man of bad habits and violent temper ; and though no actual explanation had ever passed between them, Ponsonby guessed that her marriage had been brought about, not by her own choice, but by the influence, possibly the manœuvres, of her family. This surmise, however, he never confided to David, who was extremely indignant on his friend's account, and who cherished a bitter grudge against his cousin, although he had seen little of her.

It was not long before Ponsonby drew from David the history of his own love affair,

which, indeed, that young man was quite ready to speak about, and also to dilate at great length upon Elsie's charms, and his own difficulties and cares ; to all of which his friend listened with praiseworthy patience, but with inward disapproval. He had not a high opinion of David's estimate of women, and was sorry that he had gone too far to recede. He did not for a moment allow himself to suppose that the girl would really wait for David, or that the marriage would ever take place, and thought it kindest, therefore, not to be too encouraging.

'I was a fool, I suppose,' said David, 'to speak when I did, and get her and myself into a row.'

'You were, my dear boy, if you will excuse my saying so, a very complete ass. You have done for yourself all round, it seems to me.'

'Nothing of the sort !' retorted David. 'It is only a matter of time. And as to being such an ass, I would have been a far greater ass if I had let it alone. Under the cir-

cumstances I couldn't have done anything different.'

Ponsonby raised his eyebrows, but said nothing.

'You would have done the same yourself, Ponsonby,' pursued David.

'I think not,' replied his friend.

'And now the next thing to be done,' said David, 'the only thing, is to go and get her father to give his consent. He is a cross-grained old chap, as I understand, but you'd think he'd see the thing in a right light, when it is put before him.'

Ponsonby was silent for a few moments, while he took out a cigarette and lit it. Then he said, 'I don't want to discourage you, David; I think, under the circumstances, it is the only thing you can do. But don't be surprised if—— well, leave it to time. There is no saying what may happen.'

'No, there isn't. All sorts of confounded things may be happening at this moment, and I kept here, not able to move hand or foot—it's enough to make a saint swear.'

Ponsonby was in no such hurry to leave Ardvoira. The shooting was good, and the party pleasant; and had David been, as usual, full of good humour and overflowing with spirits, he could have stayed on contentedly for weeks. But David in love was not such an agreeable companion as to render a longer sojourn desirable. Both young men, therefore, were glad when the last of the guests had departed, and there was now no absolute need for David to remain; and one morning towards the end of September they set off together, Ponsonby to pay some visits in Perthshire, intending to meet his friend again on his way south after leaving Rossie.

David reached St. Ethernans the same evening, and soon found the Star Hotel, which Elsie, with due forethought, had recommended to him. Here he remained all night, and the next morning after breakfast was eager to set out for Rossie, though half afraid to arrive too early. He passed Aunt Grizel's house, which he recognised from Elsie's description; he even stopped in front

of it, but decided that it would be impossible to intrude upon an old lady at that early hour. After a few minutes of indecision, he set out to walk to Rossie. True, he did not know the way, but he could inquire ; it would be better to lose himself than to arrive there inopportunely.

The way for nearly three miles was quite simple, but after passing through the thick wood which lay beyond the moor, the road divided into two branches, and David, after some deliberation, took the wrong turning, though he was now on the Rossie property. He had not proceeded far before he was aware of a great shouting, hallooing, and barking of dogs ; and presently perceived that part of a flock of sheep, which was being driven along the road he had just quitted, had broken away, and that two men were vainly trying to head them.

From his position in front, David saw at once what was needed, and springing over the 'dyke' into the field, he easily managed to turn the foremost stragglers, so that when

the men came up they were soon able to restore the escaped sheep to the main body.

This done, David asked whether he was on the right road to Rossie.

‘Gang you forrit wi’ the sheep, Aang-us,’ said one of the men, with a commanding gesture, for he was none other than Sandy Duncan, the Rossie grieve. ‘Aweel, sir, gin ye’re for Rossie, ye’re on the richt enough rod, in *wan* sense. And gin ye’re a freend, I wad jist say, gang east ’hrough yon park, it’s rael direck. But if ye’re no acquaint wi’ the faemily, I wad gie ye my advice to turnn aboot an’ tak’ the public rod. Thae deevils has gien us an awfu’ dance, as they hev,’ he concluded, taking off his hat, and wiping his forehead.

‘Are they Captain Ross’s sheep?’ asked David.

‘Ou ay, they’re jist some o’ wer ain gimmers. Ay! an’ it hadna been you, I wadna winder but we’d lost wer tren. Gude day t’ye, sir,’ and as David was moving off,

Sandy once more shouted after him, 'Yonder the Laird himsel'! 'gin ye speir at him he'll maybe gie ye permeesion to gang 'hrough the park.'

The Laird himsel'! David's heart beat quicker at those words, but taking the bull, so to speak, by the horns, he went straight up to the Laird and accosted him with a friendly smile. 'How do you do, Captain Ross?' said he. 'I have just had the pleasure of turning your sheep.'

The Laird surveyed him from head to foot with a blank countenance.

'I'm obliged to you,' he said at length. 'That shepherd of mine is the greatest idiot that ever drew breath in a body.'

'That is very annoying,' said David. 'But I am glad I met your men, as I had lost my way. I was coming to call upon you, Captain Ross, if you will allow me. My name is David Lindsay.'

'Oh!' said the Laird, eyeing him again—pretty sharply this time. 'You'd better—come in and have some luncheon.'

David was relieved at the turn this last sentence had taken, for there had been a distinct pause in the middle of it, and from the expression of the Laird's countenance, it might have been expected that he was going to suggest that his self-invited guest had better go back to wherever he came from. However, they walked to the house together quite amicably, the Laird responding civilly to David's remarks, but not making any on his own account. David was introduced to Mrs. Ross, who rather embarrassed him by her profuse apologies for the scantiness of the luncheon; and after that meal, he accompanied the Laird to his own den, and sat for a time answering his questions about the farming and sport at Ardvoira, in which his host evinced considerable interest.

David was anxious to speak without delay upon the business which had brought him to Rossie, but on making the attempt to do so the Laird changed the subject so decidedly that he was rather at a loss. At length he rose from his seat. 'It is time for me to go,'

he said, 'but I can't do that, Captain Ross, without explaining what I came for.'

The Laird took his pipe from his lips, and examined it. 'I am well enough pleased to see you,' he said, 'if that's all.'

'But it is not all,' said David. 'I didn't come only to pay you a visit, Captain Ross.'

'Oh!' said the Laird grimly. 'I thought you did.'

He waited a moment, glancing furtively at the young man as if to enjoy his discomfiture; then he knocked the ashes out of his pipe and rose also from his seat. 'Where are you stopping?' he asked.

'At the Star Hotel at St. Ethernans,' answered David. 'It seems a good sort of inn.'

'You'd be better here. I'll send for your traps.'

'You are very kind,' said David, colouring with pleasure. 'I shall be most happy——'

'I want the rabbits shot,' interrupted the Laird. 'They're a perfect nuisance. Have you brought your gun?'

David replied in the affirmative.

‘You can take a day at them to-morrow.’

When the necessary orders were given, the Laird strolled out with David to ‘take a look round the place,’ in a spirit of perfect friendliness and concord. He talked about crops and cattle, and behaved to the young man as if his coming were the most natural thing in the world, and a matter of daily occurrence. David could scarcely believe in his own good fortune, and only hoped that his host would soon of his own accord give him an opportunity of speaking on the subject which he had at heart. But Captain Ross gave him no such encouragement. The rabbits occupied them all the next day, and David, being a good shot, found evident favour in the Laird’s eyes, for the latter, though a thorough farmer, had in his heart that respect for sport which befits a country gentleman. They were thus apparently on the best of terms, and with his hostess David soon established no less friendly relations.

Euphemia had been rendered very nervous

by David Lindsay's sudden appearance, for although she had now become in some degree accustomed to her new position, having received and returned the visits of her neighbours, he was the first stranger who had stayed in the house for more than an hour or two since her marriage. In return for her many anxious inquiries after his comfort, David tried to talk to her upon other topics, but the conversation invariably came round to housekeeping, and especially to servants, whose ways were a sore trouble and distress to Mrs. Ross. She soon confided to David many domestic perplexities which were altogether beyond the range of his experience; but he, not wishing to be supposed ignorant upon any subject, advised and laid down the law with a gravity of manner which he had picked up from Ponsonby, and which was altogether unnatural to him.

Euphemia's greatest trial at present seemed to be the misconduct of 'tablemaids.'

'Would you believe it, Mr. Lindsay,' she said, 'I have had to part with two gerrls

since I came here, and the one I have got now is going away at the term. Two—surely I'm not miscounting. No! Bella Ritchie was the first; she was here when I came. A smart gerrl, I'll not deny, but she gave me impidence the very first day!

'You don't say so!' said David. 'I am shocked to hear of such conduct.'

Mrs. Ross shook her head and sighed.

'She was an upsetting monkey, but they are all alike, Mr. Lindsay, and that's the truth. You see'—she lowered her voice confidentially—'I'm not acquaint with their ways, and the Captain, he's hasty. But the Captain will not allow of any impidence to me—no, Mr. Lindsay, that's a thing he will not put up with. It just sets him dancing wild, and he gave Bella warning on the spot! The housemaid, Janet Kilgour's not so bad, but then she always needs me at her tail;' and Euphemia sighed again.

'Does she indeed, Mrs. Ross?' said David, rather bewildered.

'You wouldn't believe the trouble I have

with her,' answered Euphemia. 'But I hope, Mr. Lindsay, you're comfortable in your room. I saw the sheets aired myself, and although there was a wee bit out of the soap-dish, I thought you'd maybe overlook it.'

David felt flattered by the proof of Mrs. Ross's confidence which this conversation evinced.

It took place in the evening, after the shooting of the rabbits, and was interrupted at length by the Laird's entrance. Euphemia's whole manner then changed; she became silent, and retreating to an arm-chair near the table, she began to smooth out her lilac silk gown, glancing nervously at her husband for approval.

When first they were married she had annoyed the Laird by her humility and retiring manner, and he had been at some pains to direct her as to her behaviour. He had strictly forbidden her to sit upon anything smaller than an easy-chair, or to go to the kitchen for what she wanted, instead of ringing the bell; and, as she herself had told

David, was particular that the servants should pay her proper respect. But somehow, poor Euphemia always managed to say and do the wrong thing, partly from nervousness, though her husband, considering his temper, showed wonderful patience and forbearance with her.

The next morning, at breakfast, Euphemia, emboldened by the cheerfulness of her guest, became quite lively and chatty; the Laird, on the contrary, appeared somewhat morose.

It was a brilliant autumn morning, and David hazarded a remark that it was fine weather for the harvest. The Laird only grunted discontentedly in reply, so his wife hastened to answer for him.

‘I am sure, Mr. Lindsay, it is that, and although the turnips may be needing a drop of rain, we cannot control the weather. It’s a fine thing to have a cheerful spirit. Is the tea to your liking, Captain? Take a wee drop more cream to yourself now.’

‘No, thank you,’ said the Laird shortly.

‘What excellent tea yours is, Mrs. Ross,’ said David.

‘Indeed, Mr. Lindsay, I am very proud you like it. The Captain is just extraordinary partial to it, are you not, Captain?’

‘No,’ said the Laird.

Euphemia twisted her hands and smiled. ‘Oh dear, dear!’ said she. ‘You’ve surely risen on your wrong side this morning. This very chest of tea, Mr. Lindsay,’ she resumed, ‘if you’ll believe me, was sent home by my youngest brother Alick from India; he’s what they call a tea-planter out there. They say it’s a kind of shrub it grows on, but you’ll know, Mr. Lindsay, being an Injun yourself. There’s surely nothing wrong with your egg, Captain?’ her voice taking a high note of alarm, as the Laird pushed away his egg untasted. ‘It’s really a pity to boil the eggs if you’re not to eat them, when they’re getting scarce with the hens moulting, poor things, and that bare, some of them, they’re fair indelicate to look upon. But your egg’s quite good if you’ll only try’—drawing the rejected egg towards her for examination.

‘Let it alone, will you!’ growled the

Laird. 'It's perfectly rotten;' and hastily finishing his breakfast, he strode out of the room and banged the door.

'It's a pity he's so cankered to-day,' observed Euphemia mournfully, still looking towards the door. 'It's just *sometimes*, Mr. Lindsay, and *I* think it's his stommick. He's terribly bawthered with his stommick, and that's the truth. But don't let him put you from the eggs, for they're really very fine.'

When his hostess had gone to her household duties, David strolled out at the front-door, and stood in the sunshine smoking thoughtfully, and considering what he had better do next. It was all very well to have come here to stay with Elsie's father, and apparently to enjoy his favour; but it seemed to him that he was no nearer the object of his coming than at first. Some explanation must be arrived at; but to-day, if the Laird were really indisposed, perhaps it would be injudicious to hasten matters. As he stood musing, Elsie's many loving descriptions of her old home came into his mind, and he

looked round him to try and verify them with his own eyes.

Certainly the place looked pleasant enough on that sunny morning, for autumn is the time when Scotland looks her best. There had been an early touch of frost, and the air, though still, was pleasantly bracing, and full of the fresh smell of the sea. The grass, where it was shaded from the sun, was still white with dew and threaded with gossamers; the rowan trees hung red with berries; and the robins were twittering their autumn songs from every bush and shrub. A late grasshopper or two were audibly enjoying the sunshine; and from more than one distant harvest-field the reaping-machines, sounding like magnified grasshoppers, were busily at work.

A heavy footstep was heard on the gravel, and the Laird made his appearance.

‘I am going to the barley-field,’ said he.

David walked beside him in silence, reflecting the while that he might as well go and see Aunt Grizel that day. He had pro-

mised Elsie to make her acquaintance, and in her he might perhaps find an ally and supporter.

Accordingly he intimated his intention of calling on the old lady that afternoon.

‘Eh? I didn’t know you knew her,’ said the Laird.

‘I haven’t made her acquaintance yet,’ replied David, ‘but I ought to, being a—a connection, you know, and in the neighbourhood.’

‘She has got plenty of acquaintances, and connections too,’ said the Laird suspiciously. ‘It’s not likely she’ll want new ones, at her time of life. But please yourself. You can take the pony if you like.’

‘Thank you, very much, Laird,’ said David, ‘but I think I’ll walk.’

Miss Grizel received David Lindsay with formal politeness, but her manner became more gracious as soon as she fully understood who he was. He explained to her for what object he had come, and how he had been received at Rossie, and candidly asked her

advice. This pleased the old lady, who liked to look upon a handsome young face; she thought him 'a fine open lad,' and her sympathies were soon enlisted on behalf of the young lovers. Still, she would not give David too much encouragement, and only advised him to tell the Laird everything, and trust to time.

The interview was long, and when it was over David did some other errands in St. Ethernans, and returned to Rossie in time for dinner.

In the smoking-room that evening, while he was meditating how to begin the attack, which he was determined should come off that night, the Laird anticipated him by plunging directly into the subject.

'I understand that you had some confounded—some purpose in coming here?'

'My purpose,' replied David, rising and standing with his back against the mantelpiece, 'is connected with your daughter. I came here to ask your consent to marry her.'

‘You have spoken to her, have you?’

‘Yes,’ said David, ‘I have spoken to her, and I assure you that her happiness, as well as mine, is involved——’

‘You are talking nonsense. Can you keep a wife? for I don’t see what you’re to keep her upon.’

David hesitated a little. ‘At present, certainly,’ he said, ‘I couldn’t very well, without help, support a wife in comfort; but if I once had your consent, all that might be easily arranged.’

‘What is the use of talking in riddles?’ growled the Laird. ‘Who the deuce do you expect help from, and what are your expectations?’

‘General Lindsay has told me plainly that he intends to make me his heir. This, of course, is in confidence, Laird, and I think he would be quite ready to help me now, provided I married Elsie. Then there is Ardvoira, as you know.’

‘A very small property,’ said the Laird. ‘What is the old man’s age?’

‘Eighty-six,’ said David shortly. ‘He’s a fine, hale old gentleman.’

‘Hum!’ said the Laird. ‘There’d be the wife’s jointure to come off it—same with the General. You don’t mention Corinzean?’

‘I did not mention Corinzean,’ answered David, ‘because the young fellow, the Master, may live as long as I do—though to be sure he’s an invalid. But it’s not a thing I have any right to count upon.’

‘I wonder at that,’ observed the Laird sarcastically, ‘since you and Elsie seem to do nothing else but wait for dead men’s shoes. But whoever marries her needn’t expect much. Her mother’s money is just £2000, and it doesn’t do more than keep her in clothes. I don’t know what she does with them all, to be sure—it’s her business.’

There was silence for a little while, after which David said, ‘Then, Laird, you have no objection to our engagement, provided I can furnish enough to keep Elsie in comfort?’

‘Objections?’ said the Laird, ‘of course

I have objections. Why, the girl doesn't know her own mind. Do you mean to say she wants to go out to India with you ?'

'Yes,' said David. 'Certainly she does.'

'She's a fool,' said the Laird. 'She wouldn't keep her health there a month.' And, laying aside his pipe, he took up a newspaper and read, as if determined to put a stop to further conversation. David meanwhile considered what argument he should next employ, while appearing deeply engrossed in the pages of the *North British Agriculturist*.

After a long interval the Laird put down his paper, refilled his pipe, and demanded abruptly, 'What on earth do you want, a young chap like you, lading yourself with a wife? Marriage plays the very mischief with a man; it's the greatest mistake he can commit. No man should marry till he is forty, and he is better to leave it alone then.'

David laughed. 'It is too late to give me that advice now, Laird,' said he. 'If I

waited to ask Elsie till I was forty, she might have taken some other fellow meanwhile.'

'You had no business to ask her at all, when you are not in a position to marry her.'

David thought it more prudent to make no answer, and the Laird sat a while watching him furtively from under his shaggy eyebrows.

'I don't know what you think you see in Elsie,' he said presently. 'She's a—a washed-out thing. I don't suppose any one would call her good-looking?' this with a slightly questioning inflection, as though he would rather like to be contradicted.

But the young man frowned; the remark did not please him. 'I don't want anybody to call her good-looking,' he answered very curtly.

'I suppose you have the sense to see for yourself that you can't marry just now, at any rate,' said the Laird. 'You must just go back to India and take your chance. If I thought the girl would make herself miser-

able about you—but I scarcely think that's possible,' and he eyed David disparagingly. 'What do your own people say to it?'

'My mother has not seen Elsie yet, and your consent was the first thing to be obtained. As to my stepfather I am not responsible to him in any way.'

'You expect nothing from your stepfather, then?'

'Certainly not; I am quite independent of him. If he provides for anybody it will be for my brother.'

'There is no objection, then, on their part?'

'I am sure there will be none when once I bring Elsie to see my mother.'

'That's as much as to say she has objections now. Why, God bless my soul, young man!' said the Laird, bringing his hand down on the table with some violence, 'there's no occasion for the girl to go where she's not wanted. She could always come home, for the matter of that.'

'She shall be made welcome wherever she

goes, if you trust her to me,' said David. 'This then is clear, Captain Ross—if I obtain the necessary means, and my mother's full consent, you don't withhold yours. I shall go south to-morrow, and——'

'Wait a minute,' said the Laird.

Then followed a discussion of the amount required to maintain a wife, on which subject there was considerable difference of opinion. David's proposal to marry upon £500 a year was scornfully rejected by the Laird, who intimated that £800 was the smallest possible income he could for a moment bring himself to contemplate. 'Not that you'll get even that just now,' he said, 'but I suppose you can wait a year or two, if you're bent on making fools of yourselves.'

Euphemia had naturally had her suspicions as to the causes which had brought David Lindsay to Rossie, and though she had no knowledge of the facts (for the Laird never, if he could help it, talked to a woman on any subject of importance), had nevertheless made a pretty correct conjecture, and was over-

flowing with curiosity. She ventured to ask David a few leading questions about her stepdaughter, having found out that he had been staying at Chippingham.

She supposed that Elsie had become a very grand young lady now? she had heard that her uncle, General Lindsay, was a wealthy gentleman. Did not Mr. Lindsay think her a beautiful gerrl? so genteel!

David admitted that he did.

‘And yet so simple,’ continued Euphemia, ‘and so affaictionate! Such pretty letters as she writes me! Eh! I hope she’ll get a nice husband.’

But David did not gratify her curiosity, and finding him impenetrably reserved upon this subject, Euphemia went to confide her surmises to Marjorie, with whom she was on familiar terms, although it was only on the rather rare occasions when Marjorie was in a good humour that the latter condescended to gossip with her mistress.

‘I’ll wager, Majorie, there’ll be a wedding in the family some of these days. You’ll see

that young gentleman has not come here for nothing.'

'Ay?' said Marjorie. 'Will he be coortin' Miss Elsie?'

'Oh, I've no reason to say so, but I can put two and two together, and I think it. I just mentioned her name to him, to see what he would say, and although he's very discreet, and answered me as mim and as prim—he turned as red as fire all over,'—which was a slight departure from exact truth, but had the effect of fully arousing Marjorie's interest.

'Ay?' she said again. 'I wouldna winder. Aweel, he's a wise-like lad, and the Captain's rael ta'en up wi' him.'

'And what a handsome gentleman!' exclaimed Euphemia. 'Eh, Marjorie! what a noble presence!'

'He's no ill to look upon,' replied the less enthusiastic Marjorie. 'Miss Elsie will have nae need to think shame for him, for that maitter, if his inward pairts be conforming.'

‘D’ye think the Captain’s very fond of his daughter, Marjorie?’ inquired Euphemia.

‘Ay is he!’ was the emphatic reply, ‘I’sse warrant he thinks there’s few can compare with her.’

Euphemia’s countenance fell, for there was a lurking jealousy of Elsie in her heart, and she would have liked to suppose that her husband did not care for his daughter in the least. She sighed wearily, and, as Marjorie did not seem disposed for further conversation, she left the kitchen far less briskly than she had entered it.

Thus David, having won favour at Rossie from all whose good opinion was worth cultivating, left the place well satisfied, on the whole, with his reception.

CHAPTER XVII.

‘Thou hast never in thy life
Show’d thy dear mother any courtesy;
When she (poor hen!) fond of no second brood,
Has cluck’d thee to the wars, and safely home,
Loaden with honour.’

LADY ELEANOR FITZGERALD had an afternoon in the week on which she received company. It was a penance, she used to tell her intimate friends, and really she thought it right to practise some sort of penance. Some people go to church on saints’ days, and some people eat fish on Fridays, and, if they found themselves the better for it, she saw no reason why they should not. But, for her part, she would receive company on Thursdays, and do her duty to the neighbourhood, however much it bored her.

On one particularly wet Thursday afternoon in October, Lady Eleanor was sitting,

beautifully dressed and very gracious, listening to the conversation of the Reverend Cecil Beaumont, a young curate, who was the only visitor as yet announced.

‘Yes, a great change,’ said Mr. Beaumont, who had but lately come to the neighbourhood. ‘At Gastown, where my late curacy was, I had the entire charge of six thousand souls. It is a great responsibility.’

‘Oh, but you could not be really responsible for their *souls*, could you?’ said Lady Eleanor. ‘Still, it must have been a dreadful wear and tear. Then you like this better?’

The curate was proceeding to explain how he actually was responsible for the souls of his former congregation, for which charge he felt himself quite competent, and did not mind it in the least, when the door opened, and another young man walked in unannounced.

‘My dear David,’ said Lady Eleanor, rising, ‘where have you come from? Let me introduce you to Mr. Beaumont. My son, Mr. Lindsay. Have you just come from Scotland?’

David did not look quite pleased at finding a stranger there, but Mr. Beaumont did not seem to think it at all necessary to cut his visit short; and when the bell rang again, and Mrs. and Miss Freeman were announced, David looked reproachfully at his mother and sighed. She, however, received her visitors with the most unruffled sweetness, and began to talk to Mrs. Freeman, while Mr. Beaumont, seating himself by Miss Edith, began a conversation which was evidently highly interesting to that young lady.

David now meditated an escape, which, however, the entrance of tea prevented, as he felt it incumbent on him to hand the cups, and, as more and more visitors poured in, his impatience increased. He knew no one besides the Freemans; so, taking advantage of Mr. Beaumont's temporary absence, David seated himself by Edith, and drew her attention to the curate, who was benevolently supplying the wants of a deaf old lady, and vainly trying to find out whether she took sugar or not. The old lady had an ear-

trumpet, of which she had given Mr. Beaumont the wrong end, and was impatiently waiting, with head turned away and the mouthpiece to her ear, for the expected communication. Edith giggled and blushed, and put on so many little airs that David wondered where such a young country-bred girl could have acquired them all ; inwardly comparing her fluttering, affected manner with Elsie's perfect composure and simplicity. However, he found Edith sufficiently amusing to talk to ; and when Mr. Beaumont came back he still took a pleasure in keeping the place he had usurped, and watching the curate's blank and rather astonished look when he found that the young lady had no longer a word or a glance to bestow upon him. He was a good-looking, even a handsome man, this same Mr. Beaumont, and Edith had a very genuine appreciation of him ; but she thought a little flirtation with David Lindsay would do her admirer no harm, while it afforded pleasing pastime for herself.

David's retribution came, however, when

many of the guests departed, and the curate with them, but the Freemans still sat on. He could not shake himself free of Edith, who wearied him with her silly little speeches and grimaces ; he began even to think her ugly, and to wonder whether any girl had ever had such large fat cheeks before ; and when they had at last taken leave he demanded of his mother, with more irritation than he usually displayed, what could induce her to have all those infernal people calling at the same time ?

‘ My dear, how could I know you were coming to-day, if you don’t even take the trouble to write a line ? Where have you been, David ? Have you come from Ardvoira, or where ? ’

‘ From Ardvoira, no ! ’ said David. ‘ I had to stay a tremendous time there, though. I came from Chippingham to-day. ’

‘ From Chippingham ? What were you doing there ? ’

‘ Ratifying my engagement, as Aunt Caroline calls it, ’ said David, with a half-embar-

rassed laugh. 'I went to Rossie, mother—I wrote you that, you know—and the old Laird there is quite agreeable, conditionally, of course, and all that.'

Lady Eleanor was indignant.

'I wonder, David, I really wonder how you can be so undutiful and unfeeling! I don't expect much feeling or much consideration from you—I never have.'

'I don't know why you shouldn't,' put in David *sotto voce*.

'But that you should go and do the exact opposite of all I wished, after I've planned and considered and had sleepless nights for years thinking about your future, is a little too much even for me to bear! And now you come and coolly tell me about it, as if you had done something rather clever!'

'Mother dear, I didn't want you to have sleepless nights——' began David; but Lady Eleanor was not to be pacified.

'No!' she said; 'do not touch me or come near me, it is mere hypocrisy. You have behaved disgracefully, and if you marry that

girl I will never forgive you. So now do as you like.'

David went away, deeply hurt and mortified, and although the afternoon was closing in, and the rain was falling heavily, he walked out without either greatcoat or umbrella, feeling himself an ill-used martyr, and rather pleased than otherwise at getting wet. After he had walked a mile or two, however, his conscience told him that his mother's reproaches were not altogether unjust, and that he had certainly not treated her as she was accustomed to be treated. In his eagerness to win Elsie he had passed his mother over, dealing first with the obstacles which seemed to him most formidable, and fancying that her consent would be easily gained, and that she might be talked over at any time. He had sent her short and hasty notes in answer to her letters, or else had not written at all; and on leaving Rossie he had gone straight to Chippingham, taking Ponsonby with him, without giving her an idea where he was to be found.

He might have stayed on at the Elms indefinitely, in the joy of his reunion with the object of his affections, had not Mrs. Lindsay had the good sense to dismiss him somewhat peremptorily as soon as she found out that Lady Eleanor had not yet been consulted. Still, both David and Elsie had a good deal to go through from Aunt Caroline, whose sympathy with them had taken the form of moral exhortations of a distressingly public nature, mingled with tears and blessings. The General, too, who, unhappily for them, had once met the lovers going out for a walk, was always pointing to the river and saying, 'Doun the burn, Davie.' It was his one joke, and he never tired of it, but repeated it daily, and sometimes two or three times a day, chuckling with delight at his own wit. All this, however, David had endured for his love's sake with surprising fortitude, suppressing his inward irritation till he reached home, and then venting it upon his mother, which certainly was neither reasonable nor wise.

David returned home in a very proper frame of mind, seeing his fault and desirous of making amends ; but Lady Eleanor had said too much in her anger to be quickly reconciled again. She would hardly speak to her son all that evening, and averted her eyes and curled her nose whenever David approached, as if he were some loathsome sight. It was vain to look for any sort of sympathy from Mr. Fitzgerald ; *he* did not even perceive that there was anything amiss, but was anxious to have his stepson's opinion upon some sherry which he had just got. David did not like it and said so, and Mr. Fitzgerald then held forth at some length upon the evils of smoking, with which young men of the present day vitiate their tastes and destroy their digestions.

Lionel had gone to Oxford. Had he been at home things might have been better, but David had never got on with his mother as Lionel did, and did not understand her so well. Until lately, David had thought little about understanding any one ; he had

found the world and the people in it pleasant, in his careless, happy-go-lucky way, and his affections had never been very strongly called out. He was very fond of his mother and of Lionel, but he knew that they were almost sufficient to one another, while he was a less favoured third. This he had always accepted quietly and without the least resentment; but when he fell in love with Elsie it was a revelation to him, and he began to discern many things which had never before entered his head. He began to see with Elsie's eyes, and to feel keenly things which he would have left unnoticed but for the thought of her. As he sat in the evening pretending to read, but in reality watching his mother as she turned over the pages of her novel, it occurred to him for the first time that if he could not marry Elsie at once and take her out to India with him, her life at home might be very disagreeable, supposing she did not get on with his mother. This was an alarming thought, but it was quite possible that she might not. He had looked upon

Alkerton as a place where Elsie might take refuge at any time when she got tired of Aunt Caroline, and he now began to see that he had been decidedly too rash in his conclusions. His mother was in reality neither obstinate nor unforgiving, but David only looked at the outside just then.

Lady Eleanor possessed the kind of beauty which is almost more striking in a middle-aged woman than in a girl, so classically perfect were her features, and so graceful every line of her figure, which time had only made more rounded and more stately. She had more expression in her face than perhaps really belonged to her character, and there was often a melancholy earnestness in her gaze which was not indicative of anything in particular. A poetical or imaginative mind might have seen all manner of deep and pathetic meanings in her dark beautiful eyes and in the perfect curves of her lips ; David, who was not poetical, merely thought that his mother looked rather out of temper, and that she was not at all the kind of person

calculated to set a timid girl at her ease ; moreover, she showed no signs whatever of relenting towards him.

David's night's rest was greatly disturbed by these reflections, nor did the situation appear much more hopeful in the morning. However, his natural cheerfulness prevailed, and he began to comfort himself by thinking that his mother's ill-humour had probably passed away, or if not, that it would in time. He resolved to make amends to her by his agreeable behaviour. 'What's the use of pulling a long face?' thought he ; and in a determinedly cheerful manner he began to whistle scraps of various melodies, as was his usual custom while dressing. Lionel was wont to say that his brother's whistling drove him distracted, and that he whistled out of tune ; but then Lionel was rather proud of his sensitive ear, and David did not allow himself to be in the least influenced by this criticism.

He came down rather late to find Mr. Fitzgerald sitting alone at breakfast, and inquired where his mother was.

‘She has heard that your brother Lionel is ill,’ answered Mr. Fitzgerald in a resigned voice, ‘and it seems she cannot eat her breakfast. I do wish, David, that *some* of your family would learn to shut the door. Your mother has just left it open, and you know that to eat while sitting in a draught is most pernicious.’

Lady Eleanor presently returned, looking so pale and anxious that David’s heart smote him. He greeted her affectionately, and asked for particulars about his brother. Lionel did not seem to be very ill, but he was suffering from an attack of low fever, and it was impossible to bring him home or even to remove him in his present state. Lady Eleanor was undecided what to do, as she knew she was of little use as a nurse, and yet she could not bear the suspense of being away from him.

David at once volunteered to go and look after Lionel, which would both please his mother and be a relief to his own mind. He promised to take the very best care of

his brother, and send daily bulletins. To this Lady Eleanor consented gladly, even saying it was a mercy David arrived when he did, and that he was the only person she could have trusted to send. She hovered about him anxiously whilst he prepared for his journey, suggesting that he should take with him all manner of curious and unlikely articles of food for the use of the patient.

‘And be sure you write every day, David, and send for me at once if he should be worse.’

‘Yes, yes, I will,’ said David, ‘but cheer up, mother, depend upon it he is not so bad as all that. And, mother,’ stopping her as she was going out of the room, ‘I am sorry if I annoyed you that time. Of course I ought to have written oftener. But you are not put out with me now, are you?’

Lady Eleanor looked at him blankly for a minute, as if not quite knowing what he meant, then she pulled her hand out of his and turned away half angrily.

‘It is very hard, it is enough to break any

one's heart, to have sons like mine. There is Lionel, who never disobeyed me, dying, most likely, at that detestable place, and you, who never do a single thing I ask you——' Here Lady Eleanor broke off and began to sob, to David's great concern and alarm, for he had seldom seen his mother in tears, and did not, as Lionel would have done, at once jump to the conclusion that it was entirely because she had had no breakfast.

'Mother,' said David, 'for heaven's sake don't do that. I can't help being well and Lionel ill, you know (I don't believe there is much the matter with him either), and I never disobeyed you but once, and that's done now, and what's the use of going on about it? You would not have me go back to Elsie and say I had changed my mind, would you?'

'It would be better if I were dead and in my grave,' said Lady Eleanor, 'and then my children could marry as many beggars as they choose.'

She dried her eyes and left the room,

and when David next saw her she was so much more cordial that he again ventured to plead his cause, this time with more success.

‘Oh, David, don’t tease me about it,’ she said. ‘How can I think about such things with Lionel perhaps in danger? but—yes—very well. I’ll see the girl since you are so set on it, and if she is a lady and all that——’

‘Of course she is a lady,’ interrupted David hotly. ‘Do you suppose I don’t know a lady when I see one?’

‘I don’t know,’ said his mother, ‘many young men do not.’

‘Well, you will like her when you see her; she is quite different from other girls—not like the girl you had here yesterday, you know.’

‘Which girl? The one you flirted so much with?’

‘I never flirt,’ said David solemnly. He gazed fixedly at his boots and apparently found an idea in them, for he said with a complete change of manner—

‘Mother, my ring—you have it, you know; will you give it to me now?’

‘What ring?’

‘The ring my godmother, old Lady Corinzean, left me, and that you said you would keep for my wife.’

‘And you would give it to Elsie Ross? Ridiculous!’

‘Yes, certainly; for no one else shall be my wife. Please give it to me, mother.’

‘I shall do nothing of the sort.’

‘But it is my own,’ said David.

‘David, I am perfectly disgusted with you! So *grasping*, that is what I dislike. It was your disposition from a baby. It is time the dogcart came round.’ She glanced nervously at the clock.

‘It won’t be round for five minutes,’ said David. ‘Do give me my ring, mother, it would not be much trouble.’

Lady Eleanor, sighing, went to her room, followed by her son. She unlocked her dressing-case and took out an old-fashioned diamond ring, quaintly set, and made to fit

a very slender finger. 'You will have to get it enlarged and it will spoil the setting,' she observed despondently, as she gave it to David without looking at it.

David regarded it with complacency, and put it in his waistcoat pocket with great care. 'I should say it would just about fit,' said he.

'I wish Lady Corinzean had never left it to you, David,' said Lady Eleanor. 'Nothing brings good fortune that comes from Corinzean.'

'Mother, are *you* superstitious?' said David. 'I would not have believed it of you.'

He took a very affectionate leave of her,—let us do him the justice to say he would have done so in any case,—and departed, promising to send the very earliest report of Lionel's state of health.

CHAPTER XVIII.

‘And but he’s something stain’d
With grief, that’s beauty’s canker, thou might’st call him
A goodly person.’

ELSIE, meanwhile, was leading a very happy and cheerful life at Chippingham. She had seen her lover again, and was allowed to correspond with him. Her engagement was sanctioned by her father and her Aunt Caroline, and she felt quite peaceful and at rest from anxiety. David’s visit had been brief, and Elsie, now that their engagement was public, and their behaviour the theme of every one’s conversation, had become so shy with her lover, that he found their interview somewhat unsatisfactory at first. But this wore off, and in the long uninterrupted talk which Aunt Caroline was so careful they should have, they learnt to

know more of each other's characters and thoughts.

Ponsonby soon became a great favourite at the Elms, especially with Mrs. Lindsay. The General, although he found him a pleasant enough companion, said he was 'a queer foreign sort of chap,' by which he probably meant to express a certain inward contempt, or at least disapproval, of a man who spent his time in painting pictures, travelling in foreign countries, and learning many languages, when he might easily settle down in his own country, devote himself to field sports, and become a justice of the peace. Mrs. Lindsay did not, any more than her husband, approve of the foreign countries, which were either Mahometan or (still worse) Popish, yet she was charmed by Ponsonby's extreme courtesy and attention to herself. She admired the intellect which beamed from his eye, and the artistic feeling which she perceived to reside in the points of his long supple fingers.

Ponsonby was less tall than David Lindsay,

and much more slightly made. He was dark in complexion and rather foreign looking, not handsome, and yet there was a picturesque and even tragic air about him which caused him to be a good deal admired by ladies, with whom his particularly unassuming and polite manners also helped to render him very popular.

Even to his friend there was not, in public at least, any of the easy familiarity of address which David employed towards him. David had various appellations for him, according to circumstances, and he answered to them all. Sometimes, but rarely, he was 'Ponsonby,' generally 'Tommy' or 'Alphonso,' although in truth the name he had received at his baptism was neither Alphonso nor Thomas, but the very ordinary and harmless one of William.

Mrs. Lindsay was fond of holding long conversations with Ponsonby on religious questions, and although she could never quite find out what particular creed Mr. Ponsonby professed, she saw in him a deeply

religious nature and an ardent desire for enlightenment. Together they deplored the world and its corruptions, and this was not hypocrisy on Ponsonby's part; for, though he listened partly out of deference, he had an unaffectedly serious turn of mind. Besides, he really liked the old lady. He was, like herself, a student of human character, and Mrs. Lindsay's eccentricities were a source of unfailing delight to him.

There was only one person in the house who, although she could not help liking him, could not get over a latent suspicion of Mr. Ponsonby, and that was Miss Maynard. She had heard somehow that he had been educated abroad, and was in some way mixed up with a Jesuit college. It was not perfectly clear to the good lady whether he had actually studied at this establishment, or whether he only lived in the same street, but, at all events, the proximity was very dangerous, and she could not rid herself of the idea that he might possibly be a Jesuit in disguise. She had hinted these suspicions to Mrs.

Lindsay, by whom she had been distinctly snubbed, and reproved for uncharitableness ; still (as she afterwards told Elsie in confidence), she felt like one who saw her dearest friend walking blindfolded on the brink of a precipice, and dared not cry out, lest she should impel her to rush forward to her destruction. She implored Elsie never to become a ‘pervert,’ nor to allow David to become one, and not to be deceived by the outward gloss of their friend’s manner, for Jesuits, she had been told, are always polished and agreeable. Elsie in vain assured her that Ponsonby was not even a Roman Catholic, for had he not listened calmly whilst Aunt Caroline denounced the errors of that faith ? and had he not gone to church with her every Sunday ? But Miss Maynard only shook her head and sighed, and said that in their system the end justified the means, and that a short walk barefoot was held to be a sufficient atonement for a long course of deception and fraud. Miss Maynard was not so much alarmed for her two

young cousins, Emma and Sophy, as Mr. Ponsonby evidently preferred Elsie's society to theirs; still she thought it right to give them a warning against the wiles of Jesuitism, which was not without its effect upon those young damsels' minds. They were quite puzzled by Mr. Ponsonby, and did not know whether to like him or not, he was so different from the young men of their acquaintance. Sophy, indeed, declared that she perceived a 'deadly fascination' about him, and that the cold glitter of his eye caused her to shudder from head to foot; but Emma, who was less imaginative, did not profess to experience these sensations, and only stood rather in awe of Mr. Ponsonby, whom she did not dare to fall in love with, as she might have done with another young man in the same circumstances.

Ponsonby liked what he saw of Elsie, and praised her to David's heart's content, while telling his friend that it was merely his usual good luck which had thrown Elsie in his way, and that he need not take any credit

to himself for a knowledge of human nature which he did not possess.

When Mrs. Lindsay discovered that David had not properly acquainted his mother with his engagement, she was extremely shocked and agitated, and commanded the undutiful son to go home the next day. Ponsonby, who was making a water-colour painting of a spot some miles up the river, where the autumn tints were especially beautiful, was earnestly entreated to remain and finish it. In another fortnight the Elms party would be broken up, Emma and Sophy returning home, and the other members, namely, the General and Mrs. Lindsay, Miss Maynard, Elsie, Howell, William, Parkins, the three dogs, and Trotter, with the carriage and horses, would all migrate to St. Leonards for change of air.

An annual visit to the seaside during the fall of the leaf was considered essential to health by the inhabitants of Chippingham ; at which time a great beating of carpets and sweeping of chimneys prevailed in the neighbourhood. Elsie, once observing these pro-

ceedings at the house of a neighbour, spoke of them casually as the 'autumn house-cleaning,' as distinguished from the 'spring cleaning,' customary in her country; but her remark was received with such evident disapproval that she never again ventured to allude to the subject. Mrs. Lindsay and Miss Maynard smiled indulgently, indeed, while they shook their heads, as who should say, 'Dear, ingenuous child!' but the cleaning of a house was manifestly regarded as rather an improper subject, not to be mentioned before gentlemen.

The lovers found time for a long talk on the morning of David's departure. Elsie was very apprehensive lest his relations should disapprove of her.

'Tell me what your mother is like, David. Shall I be afraid of her or not?'

'Afraid? oh no! there is nothing to be afraid of,' said David. 'She is a very good woman, and if she once takes to you, which she is certain to do, you will get on with her like a house on fire.'

‘By good do you mean religious?’ inquired Elsie.

‘Well, she is religious,’ said David thoughtfully; ‘yes, decidedly, I should say; she is always talking about principle, but religion is not her forte exactly, you know. She is not like Aunt Caroline,’ he added with a laugh. ‘But you have no reason to be afraid of her, my Elsie; her bark is worse than her bite.’

With this vague description Elsie was obliged to be content; but inwardly she was sorry to hear Lady Eleanor ‘barked’ at all, it did not sound encouraging.

‘I am afraid you ought to have gone home sooner, David, I have kept you away from your mother for so long, she will not be pleased at that.’

‘Oh, she won’t mind,’ said David; ‘she has got Lionel. At least she had before he went to Oxford.’

‘But Lionel is not home from India on leave.’

‘No, but you must know, Elsie,’ and

David turned to her very seriously, 'it is a very extraordinary and curious thing—I can't account for it myself—but my mother actually prefers Lionel to me!'

If Elsie was utterly astounded by this statement, she, at all events, kept her wonder to herself, and the two fell to wondering when they would meet again. David said he would take a run to St. Leonards as soon as they were settled there, and, in the meantime, he was glad that Ponsonby was staying on at the Elms.

'He is a real good fellow, Elsie, and one that is to be trusted, though he does humbug Aunt Caroline a little. I should not have thought Ponsonby was much in her line,' he continued meditatively; 'he is not a marrying man, you understand.'

'Why not?' asked Elsie. 'Hasn't he any money?'

'Money is always the first thing women think of,' observed David severely. 'No, that is not the reason. He had a disappointment in his youth.'

Ponsonby was now thirty, which David looked upon as rather an advanced age.

‘Ah, poor man!’ said Elsie feelingly, ‘is that the reason he looks so melancholy, David? And what happened to him?’

David laughed at this idea. ‘He doesn’t look melancholy, bless you! it’s the way his moustache grows. He does it because he thinks it makes him look like a Van Dyck. He’s an awfully vain fellow. Oh, he has got over his disappointment now, I hope; but the young woman behaved very badly to him, and I don’t suppose he would care to have anything to do with women again, although he makes pretty speeches and that, no end. There isn’t a greater humbug living.’

‘David, I think it is very unkind of you to take away your friend’s character behind his back. I think him extremely nice.’

‘My darling, I only want to warn you, because you don’t know the world, you are so young. You might naturally think, when a fellow pays you all kinds of compliments,

that he means something, whereas, you know, it is just his way of speaking.'

'Nonsense, David! I should not think he meant anything; besides, he has not even paid me any. Tell me about the girl who behaved badly.'

'The girl,' said David, 'was, I am sorry to say, a cousin of mine, Rose Mortimer. She was engaged to Ponsonby,—would be engaged, for her parents did not wish it,—and when it came to the point she threw him over without a word of explanation, and married a rich Yorkshire baronet, whom she could not have cared a straw about. I hear he leads her an awful life now, and it serves her jolly well right,' he concluded vindictively.

'Then both their lives are spoilt—what a sad thing!' said Elsie. 'Do you know her well, David?'

'I knew her when I was a boy; I never saw her after she was grown up. She was a nice girl then, and awfully pretty, but she changed, I suppose. If I thought *you* would

ever change to me, Elsie'—and so the pair talked on, exchanging vows of unalterable fidelity, until they were called in by Aunt Caroline, and David had to make his adieux hastily, and start off to catch the train.

A day or two later David wrote from Oxford, where he had gone to nurse his brother Lionel through an illness, which, though never severe, proved to be rather tedious. The doctors prescribed sea-air for the patient as soon as he was well enough to be moved, and no health resort seemed to David so desirable in every respect as St. Leonards, where he hoped soon to join the party from the Elms.

CHAPTER XIX.

‘Vain is the hope, by any force or skill
To stem the current of a woman’s will ;
For if she will, she will, you may depend on’t,
And if she won’t, she won’t, and there’s an end on’t.’

ABOUT a week after David’s departure the household at the Elms was once more thrown into a state of agitation by the news that Canon Gosset, a somewhat celebrated preacher, was about to arrive at the Rectory, and would deliver a missionary sermon in Chippingham parish church the following Sunday afternoon. Ernest Maynard was now hardly ever mentioned, having dropped entirely out of Aunt Caroline’s favour. Within a fortnight after his rejection by Mrs. Lindsay on behalf of her niece, he had proposed to the sister of his friend Mr. Talmud Brooks, and been accepted. The marriage

was to take place almost immediately; and Mrs. Lindsay, though she sent a handsome wedding-present to the bride, treated her former favourite with marked coldness, and was determined that her stay at St. Leonards should be prolonged till after the arrival of the newly-married couple at their home.

The news of Canon Gosset's advent caused the greatest excitement to Mrs. Lindsay, Miss Maynard, and the Dales, and many were the speculations as to whether the holy man would have fair weather for his journey, how much luggage he would bring, and whether or not his host, Mr. Broadway, would meet him at the station. Even the General was not uninterested in these discussions, while Ponsonby entered into the subject with the greatest zeal, and feigned to consider it of the last importance. The excitement being so general, Elsie was not alarmed when, a day or two afterwards, as she was coming in from the garden with Ponsonby, Miss Maynard darted past her in a breathless condition, and on reaching the

drawing-room, looked wildly around, as if she did not exactly know what she was doing.

‘My dear Mr. Ponsonby,’ she said, in answer to that young man’s fervently expressed hope that no evil had befallen the Canon, ‘I trust not; but so many things happen at once, it is quite bewildering. To think of Canon Gosset and Lady Eleanor Fitzgerald arriving at Chippingham on the same day—perhaps in the very same train! and then to be going to St. Leonards on Wednesday—it almost takes one’s breath away!’

‘Canon Gosset and Lady Eleanor Fitzgerald going to St. Leonards on Wednesday!’ said Ponsonby. ‘My dear Miss Maynard, how shocking!’

Miss Maynard clasped her hands over her eyes. ‘What can I have said?’ she exclaimed. ‘It is we who go to St. Leonards on Wednesday, but Lady Eleanor Fitzgerald intends coming here—of that there can be no doubt whatever.’

‘Has she written to say so?’ inquired Elsie, looking rather frightened.

‘Yes, dear child, she has written to your aunt, and proposes to come from Saturday till Monday. Hark! do I not hear your aunt’s voice?’

‘She is calling me,’ said Elsie, and disappeared accordingly.

Mrs. Lindsay was not particularly pleased to find that her intended announcement had been forestalled, and that her niece was already aware of Lady Eleanor’s proposed visit. However, she still improved the occasion to the best of her power.

‘She comes, my love, be sure, with a purpose—and that purpose to judge of *your* suitability as a wife for her first-born son!’

Elsie gasped, as well she might, at this alarming intimation. ‘Did she *say*,’ she asked faintly, ‘anything about me?’

‘She did not absolutely mention your name in words, my love,’ replied her aunt more soothingly. ‘Here is the substance of her note.’

The note, of which Mrs. Lindsay read every word, was as follows :—

‘DEAR CAROLINE—Would it inconvenience you to receive me at the Elms from Saturday till Monday ? I am in town for a couple of days’ shopping, and would go to you on my way home. Thanks for your last letter, which, if you can have me, we will discuss when we meet.—Your aff.

‘ELEANOR FITZGERALD.

‘P.S.—I fancy there is a train which arrives at Chippingham about four o’clock.’

‘I need not tell you, my dear Elsie,’ said Aunt Caroline, folding up the note, ‘that you must be very careful in your behaviour. Remember that in Lady Eleanor you see one who is, we trust, one day to be united to you by the ties of a very near and dear relationship. You will see in her much that may sadden, much that we could wish otherwise, but, my precious child, beware of judging. If she repels your affection, and treats you with slights and coldness, you

must still endeavour to be cheerful and submissive.'

'Will she do that?' asked Elsie. 'David said she was a person nobody need be afraid of.'

'Dear, good David!' said Mrs. Lindsay, shaking her head with a sad smile, 'he ever sees the silver lining in the cloud.'

With such-like exhortations did Mrs. Lindsay seek to arm her niece's mind for the approaching trial, and gave her so many injunctions to mind what she was about, and not to offend Lady Eleanor by this, that, or the other, that by the time the visitor arrived she had nearly reduced the unhappy girl to a state of imbecility, brought on by terror.

Great was the commotion which now prevailed in the house, and neither Miss Maynard, the Dales, nor Elsie, dared venture into the drawing-room while Mrs. Lindsay was holding long conferences there with Ponsonby; the length of whose countenance, and the glare which Mrs. Lindsay instantly turned upon any one entering the

room, being sufficient to strike terror into the boldest spirit.

And now arose an all-important question. What carriage should be sent to meet Lady Eleanor at the station? The brougham or the landau? Should it be open or closed? The season was October, the weather unusually warm; yet, on the other hand, it was apt to get chilly towards evening.

‘You had better order a fly for the servants and the luggage,’ cried the General, bursting into the room. ‘Send down about it at once, and you can send down after luncheon to see that it is not forgotten. I will speak to How’ll——’

‘My precious Henry,’ said Mrs. Lindsay, ‘I do not think Eleanor will bring any attendants except her maid; and her boxes, if bulky, can be fetched later.’

‘Eh, what?’ said the General. ‘You can’t tell—better be on the safe side. And what carriage are you going to send?’

‘That is the question which is occupying us,’ replied his wife, ‘but we have no means

of knowing whether Eleanor prefers an open carriage or a closed one.'

'I remember David once said that driving in a closed carriage made his mother sick,' said Elsie, who had not liked to mention this fact sooner, as it happened to be Mrs. Lindsay's carriage of which Lady Eleanor had complained to her son. At this statement a murmur went round the room. 'Sick,' they whispered in awestruck tones—'sick, Elsie says—her son says—it makes her sick.'

'The open carriage, then!' said the General, with his hand on the bell. 'How'll——'

'But,' said Mrs. Lindsay, 'if it should rain.'

The General took his hand off the bell, and everybody looked out of the window.

'It looks doubtful, to be sure,' said the General; 'which way is the wind?'

'It is an east wind,' said Elsie, who had been out.

Mrs. Lindsay looked up sharply; she had not wished the open carriage to be sent at

Elsie's bidding. 'Think before you speak, dear,' she said gravely. 'Spring is the season for east winds.'

At this juncture, Miss Maynard, fired with ambition to distinguish herself, jumped up and left the room hastily. In a minute she returned breathless, but triumphant.

'It will not rain, dear,' she said, sinking into a chair near Mrs. Lindsay. 'I have asked Howell, he says it will not.'

Mrs. Lindsay did not look pleased, but rang the bell. 'Send Howell to me at once.'

She now demanded of her prime minister his opinion of the weather, while the company waited eagerly for the oracle to speak. Howell stepped to the baromètre which hung in the passage, not far from the drawing-room door, tapped it, looked out of the window, and came back to his mistress.

'There *may* be rain before long, m', but I should say it will 'old up this afternoon.'

'It is extremely chilly, however,' said Mrs. Lindsay. 'To me'—she shivered and drew

her shawl closer round her—‘there is quite a peculiar chill in the atmosphere.’

‘Wind is in the heast, m’,’ observed Howell.

‘In the east at this season!’ exclaimed Mrs. Lindsay. ‘And your master just gone out!’

Everybody shuddered.

‘Did you tell him of the direction of the wind?’ inquired Mrs. Lindsay sternly.

‘Ho no,’ replied Howell with perfect composure. ‘Master will take no ’arm, m’. Heast wind is ’ealthy at the fall of the leaf—hall the medical gentlemen ’ll tell you that, m’.’

Mrs. Lindsay waved her hand with dignity. ‘The *closed* carriage, if you please, to meet the down train at 4.20.’ And so the discussion terminated.

At half-past four in the afternoon all were assembled in the drawing-room, and every face was full of expectation. Emma and Sophy stationed themselves at the passage window, to catch the first glimpse of the carriage.

‘There it is!’ they cried with one breath; ‘just turning into the drive’—and Mrs. Lindsay hastened into the hall.

‘Oh, Elsie! do come and look!’ cried Sophy, running back. ‘Howell has opened the door; she is just stepping out!’

‘She has got a hat on, I do believe!’ cried Emma from her post of observation, and Sophy flew back to verify this astounding fact with her own eyes.

‘This,’ said Ponsonby, ‘is indeed an exciting moment.’

‘I can’t see her now,’ said Sophy, disappointed. ‘She has gone in, but here comes the maid—she has a maid—no one else—now they are taking down the box—only one box, that is very little! and a bundle of——’

‘Hush, Sophy!’ said Emma, ‘she will hear you’—for Sophy had raised her voice in announcing these discoveries for the benefit of those in the drawing-room.

Lady Eleanor was by this time in the hall, and the two girls had barely time to get

back to the drawing-room before she entered, Mrs. Lindsay affectionately clinging to her arm, and the General, full of hospitality, bringing up the rear.

In the midst of her alarm at the first sight of David's mother, Elsie noticed that Lady Eleanor was much younger and handsomer than she had expected; she looked almost too young to be the mother of a man of David's age, whereas Elsie had been accustomed to regard her as a sort of contemporary of Aunt Caroline. Just at that moment the newcomer appeared to be rather tired and cross. She turned her dark eyes languidly on the three young ladies who were presented to her, without seeming to notice Elsie more than the others, and only brightened up a little when she shook hands with Ponsonby, whom she had formerly been acquainted with.

When she was at length shown to her room she did not reappear till dinner time; and Mrs. Lindsay, who had accompanied her in hopes of a private conference, returned

somewhat crestfallen to announce that Lady Eleanor Fitzgerald found herself so fatigued that she had been persuaded to rest on her bedroom sofa for an hour and a half.

Mrs. Lindsay was thus obliged to forego all discussion of Elsie's prospects that day, which disappointed her the more as the next day was Sunday, and Lady Eleanor was going away on Monday morning. The only allusion to her son's engagement was made by the General at dinner time, and this Mrs. Lindsay did not hear, as she was talking to Ponsonby, but Elsie caught the words : 'Well, what do you think of these goings on?'

Lady Eleanor's answer was inaudible, but the General proceeded gaily :

'Davie loses no time, eh? He wants to be settled early in life. As to little Elsie here, why, it seems no time ago since her poor mother was running about in pinafores. They grow up before you can look round, as one may say.'

Elsie heard Lady Eleanor's answer this time.

‘Yes, indeed, General, a couple of mere children. They will think differently in a year or two.’

‘Eh? I don’t know that. You don’t approve, eh?’

Lady Eleanor glanced round the table to make sure that no one heard. ‘Hush, General,’ she said, touching his arm softly, ‘a very foolish business. How well I remember this room,’ she went on in her usual tone, ‘nothing in it changed. Those same old engravings, and the very same text over the mantelpiece. Do you know how many years it is since I came here first?’

‘You’ve become a sensible woman since then, Nelly,’ said the General with something like a sigh.

She turned towards him quickly.

‘Ah! that name takes me back to old times.’ There was a softened look on her proud face for a moment, which made Elsie’s heart warm to her with a sudden thrill of sympathy.

Mrs. Lindsay, who had heard nothing,

now gave the signal for the ladies to retire, and they all filed off into the drawing-room, where they took seats, varying in comfort according to their rank and station. The evening passed somewhat heavily. When the gentlemen came in the three young ladies were sent to the piano to play their pieces, in which, from sheer nervousness, they all broke down, one after another. Sophy being the last and worst, was so sharply reproved by Aunt Caroline that she was forced to retire from the room in tears. Ponsonby alone was heard to murmur that the music was indeed charming, and when the performance came to a disastrous conclusion, he good-naturedly tried to divert Mrs. Lindsay's attention from the culprit.

Mrs. Lindsay had resolved to devote the following day, which was Sunday, entirely to Canon Gosset, and to put away from her all mundane things; but even the best of human resolutions are apt to yield to the force of circumstances.

Her conference with Lady Eleanor had

not yet been held, and she knew that her visitor had come expressly to talk over her son's future, and took no more interest in Canon Gosset and his missions than if that Gospel teacher had been actually at Ping-yang or Shoo-kow himself. The solemn observances of the house were disregarded by Lady Eleanor. Not only did she not appear at prayers, but she absolutely declined to go to church in the morning.

This annoyed Mrs. Lindsay considerably ; however, she thought it right to go to Gravehurst as usual, taking all her flock with her. The female members of the household were inwardly struck with horror at the strange behaviour of the visitor, but, as Mrs. Lindsay had publicly given out beforehand that they were on no account to judge Lady Eleanor Fitzgerald, no one would have dared to express an opinion, however impious they felt her conduct to be.

But when, in the afternoon, she refused even to go to Chippingham Church to hear Canon Gosset, Mrs. Lindsay herself was

really distressed, and did not know what to do with her.

‘My darling child,’ she said, drawing Elsie aside, ‘I am sorry to disappoint you, but I feel that it will be best for you to remain with Lady Eleanor this afternoon. We must remember what is due to others, and deeply as I lament poor Eleanor’s worldliness, I feel that it would be scarcely courteous to leave our guest alone a second time.’

Elsie readily complied with her aunt’s wish, although her heart failed her at the prospect of spending a long afternoon *tête-à-tête* with the alarming visitor. She had had an uncomfortable consciousness of being watched, although Lady Eleanor had never spoken to her, and she had never even once caught her eye.

‘You poor dear thing, how I do pity you!’ said Sophy, bestowing a parting hug upon Elsie before hurrying off to prepare for church. ‘Be sure to remember all she says, and tell us when we come back. I shall be dying to hear.’

‘Be sure you remember what the canon says,’ returned Elsie; ‘that is more to the purpose,’ and descended to fulfil her afternoon’s duty.

She found Lady Eleanor examining the books which were strewed about on the table, in the hope of finding something to read. Apparently her search was fruitless. No novels were ever allowed in the Elms drawing-room; newspapers were cleared away on Saturday night, and Sunday magazines put in their place; and the books on the table, which were entitled, *Little Susie’s Mission*, *Benjie’s Bread and Butter*, *Chirps with the Chickabiddies*; or (for those who preferred more solid reading) *Haunts and Hiding-places of the Reformers*, *Daylight in Dark Places*, or, *Work among our Black and Brown Sisters*, *Half Hours with the Sick and Sorrowing*, and other volumes of a like character, were rejected by her one after another.

‘Have you come to keep me company?’ she asked graciously, at length taking up a book at random, and seating herself.

‘If I may,’ said Elsie. Lady Eleanor bent her head in acquiescence, and they both read on for some time diligently without raising their eyes. Had any one asked Elsie what was the title of her book, or what it was about, she would have been utterly unable to give an answer, though she kept her eyes perseveringly glued to its pages. By and by Lady Eleanor made a slight movement to arrest her attention, and inquired very abruptly: ‘Does David write to you?’

‘Yes,’ replied Elsie. ‘Sometimes.’

‘He doesn’t write to me,’ said Lady Eleanor, and began to read again. Half an hour passed in this way, when, to Elsie’s great relief, Lady Eleanor shut her book decidedly and rose. ‘I am going out for a walk,’ she said.

‘May I come with you?’ asked Elsie.

‘Certainly,’ was the answer, and the visitor began to look around her at the walls and furniture. Presently a sudden idea seemed to strike her, and she asked: ‘Do you

think Mrs. Lindsay expected me to go to church with her?’

‘I think,’ said Elsie, rather taken aback, ‘she thought you would have liked to go.’

‘I should be extremely sorry to annoy any one about such a trifle as going to church, but the fact is, I have a wretched headache—I have had it all day. I suppose *you* never stay away from church?’

‘I don’t,’ said Elsie, ‘because I never have a headache, but if I did, I had—I mean, if I had I would.’ She stopped confused, angry with herself for her stupidity, and fancying that the expression of face with which Lady Eleanor surveyed her was one of profound contempt. But it was not so, it was merely critical; she was considering whether the girl looked prettier with colour or without.

She next fired at her another of her abrupt questions. ‘Would you rather have been at church this afternoon?’

‘I would much rather go for a walk,’ replied Elsie truthfully.

‘Well, then, let us go,’ said Lady Eleanor, ‘and be well out of the way before they come in.’

In a few minutes they sallied forth, accompanied by the three dogs, who were equally surprised and delighted at being taken out walking on a Sunday.

Elsie suggested a walk by the river side, but her companion seemed to have little taste for the beauties of nature. ‘Let us walk on the high-road,’ she said; ‘that will be every bit as good—will it not? and far less trouble.’ She asked Elsie a few questions about her life at Chippingham, what she did, and how she liked it; the girl’s answers were necessarily a little guarded, and sounded stiff and prim to herself; she was conscious of appearing to great disadvantage in the eyes of David’s mother.

‘She must think me a perfect idiot,’ said she mentally. But it was utterly impossible to judge from Lady Eleanor’s manner what she thought of her. She was thoughtful, as if pondering some question in her mind; and

nothing that Elsie said seemed to interest her at all. When they had gone about a mile and a half she stopped. 'This is a very good level road,' she said; 'let us turn now.' On their way home she spoke no word, good or bad; except once, when Elsie turned to rebuke the dogs for snuffing at the heels of a passer-by, she said to her, 'How old are you?' to which Elsie answered, 'I shall be eighteen to-morrow.'

CHAPTER XX.

Sil. Is she not passing fair?

Jul. She has been fairer, madam, than she is.

Sil. Alas, poor lady! desolate and left!—

I weep myself, to think upon thy words.'

MRS. LINDSAY had, after all, arranged the disposal of this day very much to her own satisfaction. Her plan that Elsie should stay at home and make acquaintance with her future mother-in-law seemed to her an admirable one; her own conference with the latter should take place after tea, and with this view she directed Emma and Sophy not to loiter in the drawing-room, but to retire to their room, and there meditate on the truths they had just heard so powerfully expressed by Canon Gosset. Ponsonby, she knew, would go out of doors and smoke; and she had found a means of disposing of Miss

Maynard and Elsie. At tea-time Mrs. Lindsay was enthusiastic over the sermon, and lamented her failing memory, which was unable to retain more than a small portion of so moving a discourse.

‘But you, dear Cecilia, have taken notes, I know. Elsie dear, if you will go to Miss Maynard’s room after tea, she has kindly consented to read them to you.’

Accordingly, as soon as tea was over, every one except Mrs. Lindsay and Lady Eleanor disappeared as if by magic. Elsie went to Miss Maynard’s room as directed, but when that lady began to search in her pocket for her notes the girl stopped her.

‘Never mind Canon Gosset, dear Miss Maynard,’ she said; ‘Mr. Ponsonby has told me all about him. I want to talk to you. Tell me all you know about Lady Eleanor.’

‘This has been a trying day for you, dear,’ said Miss Maynard anxiously. ‘Do you think that you will be able to love her?’

‘Yes,’ said Elsie decidedly, after a minute’s

reflection. 'I could if she would let me, but it is impossible that she can like me.'

'And why so, dear?' said her friend, kissing her. 'It would be difficult indeed to help loving you.'

'It will not be at all difficult to Lady Eleanor,' returned Elsie. 'But never mind that. I think her very interesting; tell me all you know about her. When did you see her first? and do you think Aunt Caroline really likes her or not?'

'Your dear aunt,' replied Miss Maynard, nothing loath to have a little gossip with her favourite, 'was formerly much attached to her, but—— The first time I saw Lady Eleanor was—it must be nearly twenty-five years ago, when she came here as a bride—a lovely bride, of scarce seventeen summers. Her first husband was, you know, General Lindsay's nephew; he was a young man of singular personal attractions.'

'Is David like his father?' inquired Elsie.

Miss Maynard paused before replying. 'You will pardon me, my love, when I say

that young Mr. Lindsay is scarcely so richly endowed by nature, as regards mere outward form. Nevertheless there is a strong family resemblance. Your aunt,' she proceeded, 'conceived the most enthusiastic affection for the young bride, whom she loved like a sister. Her generous heart was full of sympathy for the young pair, for theirs had been purely a love match; in fact'—she hesitated and lowered her voice—'there had been a—*an elope-ment*. My dear, you ought not to lead me into making these disclosures.'

'I knew it was a runaway marriage,' said Elsie. 'Aunt Grizel has often told me the story. But I wonder then that Aunt Caroline approved of it.'

'Your dear aunt,' said her friend, 'although by no means in her first youth, had been but lately married herself, and her heart expanded and, as it were, overflowed with affection; and this young creature, cast off as she was by her parents, was doubtless glad to find a resting-place here.'

'Would her parents not forgive her?'

‘Their resentment did not last long. Lady Eleanor was the youngest and favourite daughter, petted, indulged, and somewhat wilful. She was destined by her parents to some higher position, to which her beauty and rank might well have entitled her; her husband’s person, character, and lineage being, however, irreproachable, they ultimately recovered from their disappointment, and were willing to embrace him as a son.’

‘But did Lady Eleanor and her husband remain poor?’

‘Yes, dear; they never attained affluence during Colonel Lindsay’s lifetime. He found himself frequently in difficulties, and the expectations he entertained of succeeding to both money and rank were destined never, in his person, to be realised.’

‘And how is it,’ asked Elsie, ‘that she and Aunt Caroline have left off loving each other like sisters?’

‘I can scarcely tell you what were the first slight causes which led to estrangement. Lady Eleanor was, as I have said, wilful and

somewhat haughty, and your aunt thought her foolishly extravagant. Her husband could refuse her nothing; and your aunt, in short, regretted the way in which they managed their affairs. Then when Lady Eleanor became the mother of a beautiful boy, and your dear aunt, surrounded by every comfort which money could procure, remained childless, naturally it was a great vexation to dear Caroline. I had not then made my home permanently under your kind uncle's roof, so that I did not see Lady Eleanor again until two years after her husband's death, when she came here with her younger son, then a child of five years. Up to that time she had resided in Scotland; but she came south to place her elder boy at school, and remained in England in order to be near him. She stayed here for about two months; and it was, my love, an exceedingly unfortunate visit.' Miss Maynard paused and sighed. 'In many ways Lady Eleanor was much to be pitied, her husband and her mother both dead, and she struggling with

pecuniary difficulties. Yet—your aunt justly thought that she did not bear her troubles in a right spirit. It was painful to see how, when spoken to of economy and of patience, she gave way to fits of sullenness, often to tears; which, your aunt could not but feel, owed their origin to temper rather than to grief. Then, her method of bringing up her child was not such as your aunt could at all approve. He was a sadly mischievous little boy, and, though outwardly handsome, his infant features but too plainly denoted evil passions.'

'And he only five!' exclaimed Elsie.
'Poor little boy!'

'He was very precocious,' said Miss Maynard, 'and expressed himself with wonderful fluency for his age. There were frequent disturbances, and his mother always took his part. Well do I remember once, when your aunt reproved him severely for calling his attendant names,—shocking names, my dear! I could not repeat them,—he told her to mind her own affairs! Young as he was,

your dear aunt's keen eye could detect in him the seeds of every vice.'

'They have not come up, then,' said Elsie rather indignantly. 'I am sure Lionel is a nice boy, David seems so fond of him. I don't believe there is any vice about him.'

'I have since heard him described,' said Miss Maynard, 'as a youth of pleasing exterior, and I am willing to hope the best of every one. But I fear that never, under any conditions, can he be acceptable to your Aunt Caroline.'

Elsie remained silent for some minutes, pondering on what she had heard. 'I feel very sorry for Lady Eleanor,' she said at last. 'I think it must have been very hard for her, with all her troubles, to come here and be bullied by Aunt Caroline when she wasn't used to being found fault with. And if she does not want me to marry David, I think it is quite natural. She thinks it will be her own story over again—that I should be extravagant, and David not able to refuse me anything, and that I should waste all his money.'

‘But, my love, you are a very different person from Lady Eleanor, and would not be extravagant, I feel sure.’

‘Yes, but she can’t know that, nor that there would be no need for David to refuse me things, because I should not ask for them. But, indeed, I am afraid I am too poor for him; why was I not told all these things before? How can people know anything if they are not *told*?’ and she looked reproachfully at Miss Maynard.

‘My dear child,’ said the bewildered lady, ‘what could you have done if you had known?’

‘I might have refused David for his own good, like people in books. But don’t look so distressed, dear Miss Maynard, it is too late to do it now, and I don’t know that I am very sorry. But what did Lady Eleanor do next? Was there a quarrel?’

‘No, there was no open breach. Lady Eleanor left the Elms to reside with her father, the Earl of Lynmouth, which she continued to do until his death. But your

uncle and aunt, disapproving as they did her method of bringing up her children, did not think it right to invite her here again. Your uncle, perhaps, would have liked—but no, on such subjects they always feel together. They were most anxious to adopt the eldest son as their own, but his mother refused this offer—I may say, she rejected it angrily.’

‘Then she never came here again until now?’

‘She paid a formal visit of a few days with her husband, upon her second marriage. Mr. Fitzgerald had been a very persistent suitor, but Lady Eleanor did not accept him until after her father’s death. He made a favourable impression upon your aunt, although she could not but suspect that worldly motives on Lady Eleanor’s part had prompted the step——’ Miss Maynard stopped and started guiltily, as a knock was heard at the door. It opened a little way, and Sophy’s round face was thrust in.

‘May I come in, Cousin Cecilia? I knew

I should find Elsie here. Oh, Elsie, only think——!’

‘Dear me, Sophy,’ said Elsie, annoyed at the interruption, ‘you surely cannot have done meditating already?’

‘Long ago!’ replied the damsel cheerfully. ‘I have been talking to Bridget.’ (Bridget was the upper housemaid.) ‘Her niece is going to be married to Tysoe, the baker, he is a Particular Baptist, I wonder if auntie will let her go to the wedding! What is a Particular Baptist? Do you know, Cousin Cecilia? Elsie, do you? Bridget does not.’

‘What’s the use of your being a clergyman’s daughter if you know nothing about sects?’ returned her better instructed friend contemptuously. ‘A Particular Baptist is just a kind of Baptist which is very rare. There used to be one at St. Ethernans, who made besoms. Let us leave Miss Maynard to take her rest before supper.’ And disregarding Sophy’s question as to what ‘bizzums’ might be, Elsie left the room hastily.

CHAPTER XXI.

‘O why should fate sic pleasure have
Life’s dearest bands entwining?
Or why sae sweet a flower as love
Depend on Fortune’s shining!’

MEANWHILE, in the drawing-room, the two ladies were holding a no less interesting discussion. Lady Eleanor had moved into a large arm-chair, and was thoughtfully playing with a fire-screen. Mrs. Lindsay, having settled herself for conversation, and waited in vain for her friend to begin, at length cleared her throat and said—

‘It was not, Eleanor, without design that I left Elspeth with you this afternoon. It is best that we should understand one another plainly. What opinion, dear, have you formed regarding her?’

‘She is very pretty,’ answered Lady

Eleanor slowly. ‘*Very* pretty—and will be prettier yet. You see I don’t want to disparage her. But I wonder, Caroline, that a woman of your age and experience can encourage anything so nonsensical as this engagement.’

‘Encourage it!’ cried Mrs. Lindsay, becoming excited. ‘You know how I have acted from the first. If you did not heed the written warning which I instantly despatched to you——’

‘Now don’t get angry,’ said Lady Eleanor impatiently. ‘You said yourself we were to speak plainly. I only mean, any one might have foreseen that David would fancy himself in love with her. A boy of two-and-twenty and a pretty girl of seventeen, in a house together for three weeks! what else could you expect?’

‘I certainly did not expect,’ said Mrs. Lindsay, with her handkerchief to her eyes, ‘to be accused of complicity——’

‘If you are going to be offended, Caroline,’ said Lady Eleanor, taking up a book, ‘we

had better drop the subject. I should be sorry to hurt your feelings.' She really wished to avoid a scene, and was, in her secret heart, rather afraid of provoking Mrs. Lindsay. Although she had been spoilt all her life, it was not from real strength of will that Lady Eleanor ruled others; but by a peculiar sort of charm, impossible to describe, which was felt by most men and some women. Elsie fell under its influence at once, and was ready to become her devoted slave; but Mrs. Lindsay, it is needless to say, was as free from any weakness of the sort as ever Queen Elizabeth had been, and in her former encounters with Lady Eleanor had invariably come off victorious. But she was now perfectly aware of the difference in their positions, and not knowing her advantage, she pocketed her handkerchief and replied—'My feelings, I trust, are under control; at whatever cost of pain to myself, I will finish this conversation. You are of course aware, Eleanor, that the happiness of two young lives rests upon your decision.'

‘ This is the first time,’ said Lady Eleanor rather resentfully, ‘ that anybody has thought proper to consult me on the matter. David has rushed into this engagement without asking my advice, and now other people must take the responsibility. I don’t know what you would have me decide.’

‘ Am I to understand that you would give your consent to the marriage of these young people, provided——’

‘ How can I consent to let them marry on nothing?’ cried Lady Eleanor impatiently. ‘ You must see for yourself, Caroline, that the thing is impossible.’

‘ That is not the *immediate* question. We shall come to that point presently. I have in my possession a letter from Captain Ross, with whom I have necessarily been in communication.’ She drew out the document in question, and tapped the table with it, perhaps imagining that Lady Eleanor would instantly beg to have it read to her ; but Mrs. Lindsay’s air of superiority in the matter fretted her rival beyond endurance.

‘Oh, I know all that Captain Ross has to say. David has been staying there — he came back full of it. Captain Ross consents if I do, and if Frederick does, and all that — and if he can produce enough to live upon, which he can’t. *I* cannot prevent their being engaged, if they wish ; they will not be able to marry for years. An engagement is a very different thing from a marriage.’

‘Surely!’ said Mrs Lindsay with emphasis. ‘And that speech (in whatever spirit it was made) leads to *my* solution of the difficulty. My dear generous husband, who, in spite of all that has come and gone, has always looked upon David as his heir, is willing to allow him *now* the sum of £500 a year, which, with his own £300, will go far to satisfy the requirements of Elspeth’s father, and be amply sufficient for the needs of a prudent and self-denying young couple. This, dear Eleanor, is the proposal I wished to make to you, and to you alone ; for without your consent as a parent I should feel it wrong to proceed in the matter.’ Mrs. Lindsay here wiped her

eyes, for she felt somewhat overcome by her own eloquence, and the magnanimity of her offer, and, folding her arms, waited for her friend's reply.

‘You are very kind, Caroline,’ said Lady Eleanor; ‘really, extremely kind—but I could not hear of it. You really are too romantic, my dear. Let David go back to India, and you will find they will both change their minds in a few months.’

Mrs. Lindsay's eyes flashed with indignation. ‘You little know the constancy and the truth of these two beautiful young natures; but I had not expected such a speech from *you*, Eleanor! Strange how the world has power to alter and corrupt our hearts! Have you, then, quite forgotten your own young married life?’

‘No,’ said Lady Eleanor, looking at her composedly. ‘I remember it quite well—it was most uncomfortable. You may be shocked at me, Caroline—I daresay you are—but I don't believe in constancy and broken hearts, and that sort of thing. I know *now*

perfectly well, that if they had prevented me from marrying poor Archie—I should have been very sorry of course, but it would not have broken my heart—not a bit.’

‘And *His*?’ demanded Mrs. Lindsay, in a tone between grief and indignation. ‘What of *HIM*?’

Lady Eleanor had been about to pursue her argument, but she stopped short suddenly at these words and remained silent. She had been occupied with her own heart at the moment, and had entirely forgotten that of her husband; but as she recalled his unchanging devotion to her, her face grew grave, and she did not care to continue the subject.

‘Now if I were you,’ she began again presently, ‘I would take that pretty niece of yours about a little, and let her see some people. What can you expect if you never let her go into any society? I daresay David is the only man she ever saw.’

‘This is a totally useless discussion,’ said Mrs. Lindsay, who was now bitterly disappointed, for she had already begun to think

with joy of preparing Elsie's outfit, and now it did not seem likely to be needed. 'I know my duties, Eleanor, and you know my principles. My strength'—she laid her hand upon her heart—'is not equal to a conversation of this kind. It gives me too much pain. All I ask from you to-night is, not to reject my proposal finally; I shall look for your decision to-morrow ere you leave us. Now, dear, if you will excuse me.' She rose, and holding on by the table for support, moved with tottering steps towards the door.

'Don't let me be in your way,' said Lady Eleanor. 'I am going to my room.'

While the party were at breakfast next morning a man's voice and step were suddenly heard in the hall, and, much to every one's surprise, David walked in. A great bustle of course ensued, but David took it all with perfect composure, and seemed to think it quite impossible that any one could be in the least embarrassed or disturbed by his entrance. Hearing his mother was at Chippingham, he said he thought he would just

take a run over there, and relieve her mind about Lionel, who was getting on famously.

The morning was spent in a series of private interviews in the boudoir, held by Mrs. Lindsay with each separate member of the company, Elsie alone excepted. In some suspense she waited her turn, but it was not until the morning was nearly past that she was formally summoned to a family council in the study. There sat the General in his big arm-chair, who called her to him kindly, and patted her on the back. His wife sat on his other side, with one hand in his, and the other holding her pocket-handkerchief ready for use. Lady Eleanor sat opposite, trying to appear indifferent, and not succeeding very well, while David stood with his back against the mantelpiece, looking vexed and angry.

‘Elsie,’ said the General, in obedience to a nudge from his wife, ‘Elsie—ahem!’

‘Yes, Uncle Henry,’ said Elsie.

‘Elsie, your aunt thinks—well, she thinks—that—well, that in two years you will be older.’

‘What are you saying, dearest?’ said Mrs. Lindsay energetically; ‘that is not the question, and it is by no means my wish that——’ here she stopped and whispered in her husband’s ear.

‘Oh—ah!’ said the General helplessly, not having heard a word of the whisper. ‘Well, at any rate, somebody said so—you did, Nelly!’

‘No, I didn’t,’ said Lady Eleanor.

There was a short silence, during which David, making an impatient movement with his foot, somehow managed to knock down the fire-irons with a tremendous clatter, causing every one to start violently, and Mrs. Lindsay to shriek aloud. After quiet was restored, the General’s nerves being too much shaken to continue his speech, his wife took up her parable and said—

‘Your dear uncle was about to tell you, Elsie, that Lady Eleanor, without absolutely forbidding your engagement, has determined——’

‘Why do you insist upon dragging *me* in?’

said Lady Eleanor. 'It has been thought best by every one.'

'Not by me,' put in David.

'Your friends then,' said Mrs. Lindsay with seraphic patience, after a little pause, 'have decided upon a two years' probation for you and David. If, at the end of that time, your sentiments remain unchanged, no obstacle'—she stopped and looked at Lady Eleanor—'no obstacle will be placed in the way of your union.'

Elsie, too, glanced at Lady Eleanor, who gazed at the opposite wall and said nothing.

Elsie supposed she was expected to speak, so she said, 'I am quite satisfied then, Aunt Caroline, I think it is a very good plan. We may write to each other, may not we?' and again she looked at Lady Eleanor. But David came forward and took both her hands.

'Of course,' he said, 'and see as much of each other as we can—that is expressly stipulated. There is no help for it, Elsie; but this day two years, if I live, I will come back and claim you.'

PART II.

CHAPTER I.

‘Was macht mein lieber Held,
Mein junges Königsblut ?
Er fäheth in alle Welt,
Und hat gar stolzen Muth.
Hat er noch mein vergessen,
Und deukt er rimner mein ?
Er hat dein noch vergessen,
Beim trinken und beim essen,
Bei Regen und Sonnenschein !’

LADY ELEANOR’S three nieces sat in the garden parlour at Alkerton one December afternoon. This was a small but pleasant room on the ground-floor, oak-panelled like the dining-room, and made bright with jars of chrysanthemums, Christmas roses, and other winter-blooming flowers. The two Miss Mortimers were paying their aunt a visit of some weeks’ duration ; their sister, Lady Seathwaite, with her little girl, had lately joined them, with the intention of re-

maining till after Christmas, as the child had been weak and ailing, and the mother also was glad of a change from the cold and dreariness of Seathwaite Hall. Her husband did not accompany her ; he disliked his wife's relations, who, on their part, cordially returned the feeling ; and though Lady Seathwaite had never before ventured to leave him at home alone for so long a time, she had grown bolder for her child's sake, and in the society of her own family her natural light-heartedness prevailed, and she allowed herself, at times, to forget her miseries.

It yet wanted about a fortnight to Christmas Day ; the weather, in that cold midland district, was mild for the season, a sharp frosty morning being generally succeeded by a raw damp afternoon, and no snow had as yet fallen. The short winter day was over, a servant brought in the lamps, and the sisters left the tea-table and gathered round the fire.

‘Aunt Eleanor is late,’ observed Constance Mortimer. ‘What can be keeping

her? I hope she will come in in time to receive Miss Ross; what a bore it will be if she doesn't.'

'And so awkward for us!' said Blanche, the youngest.

'Well, it may be a bore, as Constance says, but I see nothing awkward about it, Blanche,' said Lady Seathwaite. 'Constance, it strikes me those people will want fresh tea.'

Constance looked as if she would like to contradict her sister, but finding it undeniable that there was no tea left in the pot, she rang the bell sharply. She was a slender, dark-eyed girl, with rather a narrow face and aquiline features. She was not ill-tempered, but there was something discontented and querulous about the droop of her nose and lips, and in the tone of her voice. Her movements were graceful, and she was admired by many people, but more because it was the fashion to call the Miss Mortimers handsome, than from any special good looks which Constance herself possessed. Her younger sister Blanche, a tall, well-grown,

fresh-coloured girl of nineteen, had, in spite of irregular features, more decided claims to beauty, with her dark gipsy eyes, white teeth, and rich complexion ; but it was Rosamond who had won for the sisterhood, in her unmarried days, the name of the handsome Miss Mortimers. Not so tall as either of her sisters, but beautifully formed, she looked less than her real height ; she had a charming piquant little face, gray eyes with long dark lashes, rich wavy brown hair, and a complexion like a damask rose. She would have been a most attractive creature to look upon had it not been for an air of extreme haughtiness and disdain which, ever since her ill-fated marriage, she had thought fit to assume. In her girlish days she had been gay, lively, and amusing, but the unhappy life she had led, and the constant brooding over her wrongs, had changed her greatly. Her natural courage and bright disposition prevented her from sinking into a dull spiritless state, but she had long fits of silence and depression ; her smiles now came unwillingly, as if she

was angry with herself for even feeling amused; and her acquaintances were wont to complain that little Lady Seathwaite gave herself such airs that it was impossible even to feel much compassion for her. It was only when alone with her child that her real nature showed itself; with her sisters too, she unbent a little, and condescended occasionally to make jokes at their expense.

‘My dear Rose,’ said Blanche, rather pompously resuming her argument after satisfying herself that a wheelbarrow she had heard outside was not the expected carriage, ‘whatever you may say, I think it extremely awkward for us to receive our future cousin without a proper introduction.’

‘She never will be our cousin, most likely,’ said Constance scornfully. ‘Aunt Eleanor does not wish it, she says it is most unsuitable. And do not, Blanche, for goodness’ sake, make any of your prim speeches to her. She is no relation to *us*, you know, there is no need to put things in her head; she will most likely be quite conceited enough without that.’

Rose's lip curled. 'If Aunt Eleanor finds it unsuitable,' she said rather bitterly, 'you may depend upon it that poor Miss Ross will never have a chance of attaining to the proud position of being "our relation," which Constance seems to think so desirable. You shall receive her, Blanche, and afterwards Constance can take down her conceit, you know. Wait—we will have a private rehearsal. This chair'—placing one in the doorway—'represents Miss Ross; now this is Blanche receiving her.'

As Rose advanced towards the chair, with an exact imitation of her sister's self-possessed and condescending manner, the door was thrown open, and 'Miss Ross' announced. With a quick movement Rosamond retreated, and dropped into a large arm-chair by the table, with an air of indifference which would have done her considerable credit as an actress. The chair which represented Miss Ross was left where it was, and poor Elsie, coming in out of the darkness, nearly ran against it, which did not tend to lessen the feeling of

nervous shyness which had seized her on this her first visit to David's relatives.

It was now nearly a year since David had left her to return to India, during which time Elsie had lived on her quiet monotonous life at Chippingham, of which she often felt heartily tired, yet hitherto had not been allowed to leave her uncle and aunt, even for a day. The visit to Rossie, which she had promised herself in the summer, and to which she had looked forward with such pleasure, had been postponed to another year in consequence of the events which had taken place there, and the state of her stepmother's health. Early in June Euphemia had become the mother of twin sons, thus amply fulfilling the duties of her station, and earning for herself the approbation of her husband's family and friends, though the Laird himself had been heard to remark ungratefully that one at a time would have been enough in all conscience, and that some women could never do things in moderation. The twins, who received the names of Patrick and Allan, were healthy and

thriving children, but the poor mother's life was for some time despaired of, and her recovery was so slow that for many weeks all exertion and excitement were forbidden. It was not until the month of August that, a change of air having been prescribed, the Laird packed off his wife, children, and nurses, under the charge of Aunt Grizel, to Strathpeffer, with instructions not to leave that watering-place until Euphemia had regained her strength. This would have been Elsie's opportunity for paying her father a visit, but the Laird, having got rid of his family, applied himself to the examination of his drains, which he found to be in so unsatisfactory a state that he wrote to his daughter to the effect that she had better put off her intended visit for that year. Elsie's one great pleasure, therefore, consisted in her correspondence with David, which was maintained very regularly, almost every mail bringing her a letter from her lover. In October she accompanied her uncle and aunt to St. Leonards for their 'annual inhalement

of sea breezes,' as Aunt Caroline called it, and soon after their return to the Elms Elsie received an invitation from Lady Eleanor to pay her a visit at Alkerton.

Although Elsie was extremely afraid of David's mother, and looked forward to her stay at Alkerton with far more alarm than pleasure, she never hesitated about accepting the invitation. It was not until she was actually in the train that her courage began to fail, and by the time the wheels of the carriage which had been sent to meet her crunched upon the gravel of the drive she was desperately asking herself, 'Why was I so *insane* as to come here?' Nor did the reception she met with from Lady Eleanor's nieces tend to allay her apprehensions. They were not in the least rude, certainly; yet Constance contrived to convey by her manner the impression that Elsie's coming at all, but especially her arrival by so punctual a train, was a liberty such as no really well-bred person would have been guilty of taking. Blanche followed suit; and Rosamond, after

Elsie's first entrance, took no notice of her at all, but sat in her arm-chair apparently absorbed in some crewel-work. The other two watched Elsie, as she drank her tea, with coldly critical eyes, occasionally asking her some trivial question languidly, and as if it cost them a great deal of trouble to invent so much conversation. At first Elsie tried to answer cheerfully, but finding from their indifferent replies that it was only labour thrown away, she relapsed into monosyllables, and took courage to look about her a little. The room, with its dark walls and tasteful furniture, was positively refreshing to her eyes. If there had been one friendly face in it, how pleasant it would have been! She looked across at Lady Seathwaite, whose beauty attracted her greatly, and wished that she would look up and speak; but Rosamond did not once turn her head. Elsie could just see her face in profile as she sewed, the dark eyebrow raised a little to express complete indifference, but otherwise giving no sign that she was aware of any one's presence. It was a relief to all

when the door opened and Lady Eleanor came in, leading by the hand little Mona Seathwaite, a pretty but delicate-looking child of some four or five years of age. The chair in its awkward position in the doorway at once attracted Lady Eleanor's attention, and she began indignantly—

‘It is the very oddest thing—Oh, how do you do?’—catching sight of Elsie, who had risen—‘the very oddest thing that nobody can move in this house without falling over chairs. Who could have put that there?’

‘It was I, Aunt Eleanor—I beg your pardon,’ said Rosamond, lifting her calm face from her work. ‘We were—rehearsing one of our Christmas charades before Miss Ross arrived. The word was to have been “Welcome.”’

‘A very stupid word for a charade, I think,’ said Lady Eleanor, still ruffled.

‘It happened,’ replied Rosamond slowly, ‘to be appropriate at the moment.’

She drew little Mona towards her and began to unfasten the child's heavy wraps,

while Lady Eleanor turned to Elsie with more cordiality of manner.

‘Have they taken good care of you?’ she asked. ‘How late it is! I had no idea Mrs. Freeman’s tea-party would have kept me so long, but her servants are the slowest I ever saw in my life. I thought the carriage would never come to the door.’

Elsie had hoped and expected to find Lionel at Alkerton. She had made friends with him at St. Leonards, where, it may be remembered, David had taken him to recover from his fever the year before. Elsie had been much attracted by Lionel’s handsome face and boyish confiding ways. Aunt Caroline, however, never could abide him, and still declared him to be a vicious youth. She would not even allow that he was good-looking, but maintained that he had a ‘lowering brow,’ which rendered his appearance disagreeable, she might almost say repulsive, to her peculiarly penetrating eye.

It was not until Elsie came down to dinner, on this her first evening at Alkerton, that she

learnt that Lionel was not expected for some days. This was a decided blow to her, as she had looked forward to his friendship and support, but she was beginning to recover a little from her first shyness. At dinner she sat next to Mr. Fitzgerald, opposite Lady Seathwaite, whom she looked at with increasing admiration. Once or twice Elsie caught the dark gray eyes fixed upon her with a strange look of interest, and almost compassion, but the next moment she thought it was fancy, as Rosamond leaned back carelessly in her chair, or turned to address some half-mocking speech to her next neighbour. Mr. Fitzgerald was exceedingly kind and complimentary to Elsie, and made her a speech, rendered personal by a little bow, in which he spoke of the privilege he enjoyed in being surrounded by such a 'galaxy of beauty.'

When the ladies left the dining-room Rosamond went up at once to the nursery, and did not return for nearly an hour. Constance drew up a footstool to her aunt's side, and engaged her in a very earnest,

low-toned conversation about dresses, which was unintelligible to Elsie, but which to Constance was a very serious subject indeed, as she was engaged to be married, and it related to her own trousseau. Blanche was therefore left to entertain the visitor, which she seemed to do willingly enough. She dropped the supercilious manner which at first she had thought proper to assume, and became perfectly gracious, not to say patronising. When Mr. Fitzgerald came in music was proposed, but as Elsie could not play or sing, the girls excused themselves, saying they would wait till Lionel came home, and the visitor was told off to play *bézique* with Mr. Fitzgerald, a duty which some one had to perform every evening.

Elsie found her position much more endurable than she had thought it when she first arrived, and would have gone to rest peacefully enough but for a little conversation her hostess held with her before leaving her for the night.

‘I have put you into this room, quite near

Blanche,' said Lady Eleanor, 'so you need not be frightened; but I daresay you are a sensible girl and not nervous at night. I hate noises myself.'

She glanced round the room, then took up her candle as if to go away. As Elsie approached to bid her good-night, she said suddenly, 'Have you heard from David lately?'

'I didn't hear last mail,' said Elsie.

'Nor the mail before?'

'No; but then he told me to expect that.'

'Ah!' said Lady Eleanor.

'He is not—ill? You have no reason to be anxious about him?' said Elsie in sudden alarm. 'Have you heard from him, Lady Eleanor?'

'I didn't hear *from* him,' said Lady Eleanor slowly, setting down her candle and turning to the fire. 'No, no, he is not ill—you need not look at me like that. I don't know how to tell you, child.'

'What?' said Elsie under her breath.

'It seems there is a report about him in

his regiment, I heard it about three weeks ago from Mrs. Freeman, who is sister-in-law to the Colonel, that a young Lindsay—David never mentioned a Miss Pratt to you, did he?’

Elsie shook her head.

‘Well, she is a—not a very nice girl, from all accounts, and there was some entanglement. The Colonel, it seems, was sorry for the young man, knowing the Pratts to be designing people, and he sent him on duty up the country somewhere, to be out of harm’s way—which would explain our not having had letters—and I hope it is all right now—but——’

‘I do not believe it,’ said Elsie, drawing herself up.

Lady Eleanor looked at her.

‘There is no need to be rude, my dear,’ she said. ‘It is a very unpleasant report, of course—and there *may* be no truth in it; still, a girl cannot be too much on her guard.’

‘On my guard against what?’ said Elsie proudly. ‘I do not believe a single word

of this story, Lady Eleanor—do you believe it yourself?’

Lady Eleanor avoided meeting Elsie’s direct gaze ; she hesitated, and looked fixedly at the point of her shoe, which rested on the fender.

‘One would think the Colonel’s wife ought to know,’ she said at length. ‘I am not alarmed about it, as David is not apt to get into scrapes, and of course, as you can throw no light upon it, I shall write to him at once, and learn the whole story ; but I don’t know that it would do for *you* to go on writing as if nothing had happened—that is the reason I warned you.’

‘You wish me to break off my engagement,’ said Elsie ; ‘but I have no reason for doing so, unless I believe this report, which I don’t. So I am just where I was before.’

‘You are exceedingly obstinate,’ said Lady Eleanor, provoked. ‘I am sure I don’t know what sort of a wife you will make. Well, I suppose advice is thrown away upon you ; but if I were in your place, I should certainly

not put myself into competition with a Miss Pratt. If there is to be any breach or coolness, it had better come from the girl's side.' With these words as a parting benediction, Lady Eleanor withdrew, leaving Elsie to reflect upon what she had said.

Elsie was not so brave as her words ; and this report of her lover's unfaithfulness was far from leaving her as tranquil as it had found her. She indignantly refused to admit, even to herself, that there was the least ground for believing it, yet Lady Eleanor's communication rendered her utterly miserable and perplexed. When, in the morning, she awoke from the troubled sleep into which she had at length fallen, she wondered at herself for having dared to answer Lady Eleanor as she did. Some instinctive feeling had led her to do so. 'Yet'—thought Elsie, 'perhaps I was very ungrateful, for what motive could she have had, except my good ? But if she believed the story herself, which she seemed to do, I wonder she was not more distressed. Perhaps she really was, but was

too proud to show it. I wish I could understand her.'

She was destined to be still more perplexed that day by her hostess's behaviour. Lady Eleanor did not seem to be in the least offended with her; on the contrary, she was extremely kind, and took more notice of her than she had ever done before.

After luncheon, when Constance and Blanche proposed a walk, and invited Elsie to accompany them, Lady Eleanor interfered—

'No,' she said; 'Elsie is tired. Do not tease her to walk with you; I am going to take her for a drive.'

Elsie, surprised and grateful, hastened to get ready, and was soon seated beside her hostess in the pony-carriage, which was drawn by an old white horse whose steadiness was proverbial, and who was the only animal Lady Eleanor would ever consent to drive.

As soon as they were alone together, Lady Eleanor asked, 'Have you thought over what I said last night?'

‘I have thought of nothing else,’ was the answer. ‘It was very kind of you to warn me,’ she added timidly; ‘but indeed, Lady Eleanor, I know David would not do a thing like that.’

Lady Eleanor said nothing.

‘I shall hear—I am almost sure to hear from him to-morrow. If I were at Chippingham I should hear to-day, but the letter will have to be forwarded.’

‘And if you do not hear?’

Elsie hesitated.

‘Do you think I ought not to write?’

‘I shall have to write,’ said Lady Eleanor, ‘and ask him to explain his conduct. If you have any message you had better entrust it to me.’

‘Thank you, Lady Eleanor,’ said Elsie doubtfully. ‘Yes, I will do that—if I have no letter. But I am almost sure to have one.’

Lady Eleanor seemed satisfied, and as they drove along she talked kindly and pleasantly, pointing out the different villages through which they passed. Elsie admired

the country very much: the winding river, which in summer could scarcely be seen through the thick grass, was now broad and full, and many of the low-lying meadows were flooded. The fine old trees, though now stripped of their leaves, looked beautiful, and allowed a greater extent of view to be visible through their bare branches; far away the white smoke of a train appeared and vanished, its whistle being distinctly heard in the still, heavy air. Everything was wet, very wet, heavy drops splashed from the brown thatch of the cottages, and a whitish mist rose from the river banks.

‘Yes, it is a pretty country, I suppose,’ said Lady Eleanor, in answer to Elsie’s remark; ‘but I can’t bear it myself. The climate is detestable, I have never felt well since I left Devonshire.’

Soon they came to Wroxbury, the market town of the district; and after giving some orders to one or two shopmen, Lady Eleanor turned to her companion—

‘We will go to the post-office, though it is

a little out of our way, and see if the mail is in.'

'No letter from David, though *I* ought to have heard to-day,' she said, as the servant came back empty-handed. She looked a little thoughtful, but apparently did not allow herself to dwell upon the subject.

'We will drive home by Copeham,' she said, 'I have a visit to pay there. The husband of the lady I am going to see, Captain Battisley, is an officer lately home from India, with an invalid wife. He considers himself fortunate in getting the adjutancy of the yeomanry here—as he is not very well off. She is a ladylike person.'

Elsie did not feel much interest in this information, and rather wondered why Lady Eleanor should have taken the trouble to bestow it upon her. After mounting a steep hill they reached Copeham, a picturesque village, and stopped outside the gate of a small, rather mean-looking house.

'Captain Battisley used to live in Wroxbury,' explained Lady Eleanor further; 'but

he had to leave it, and come and live on the hill, on account of his wife's neuralgia. This place is not nearly so convenient for him.' She looked full at Elsie whilst she said this, and the girl wondered still more.

'Why does she look at me so severely?' thought she. 'Anybody would think *I* had given this lady neuralgia. I never even heard of her.'

The door was at length opened by a very untidy parlour-maid, who said Mrs. Battisley was at home, and they were ushered into a hot, stuffy little drawing-room, where the invalid lady lay on the sofa. Elsie was not at all favourably impressed either by the room or its occupant; she thought the lady peevish and disagreeable, and the room not only poor but slovenly and uncared for. Lady Eleanor listened patiently, whilst Mrs. Battisley recounted some of her many grievances, and by and by asked if she might see the children.

'Certainly, if you care to,' said Mrs. Battisley, looking surprised, 'but they are in a

shockingly untidy state, I know. Shall I send for baby ?'

'On no account,' said Lady Eleanor, staying her hand as she was about to ring the bell, 'do not trouble yourself. I wanted Miss Ross to see them ; she is so fond of children. May she go to the nursery and look at them just as they are ? That is what she would really like, I know.'

Elsie was struck dumb, and dared not protest, though in truth she was by no means an ardent baby-lover. She had never lived much with little children, and though she felt kindly towards them, they had the effect of making her shy ; she did not know how to converse with them. Mrs. Battisley looked annoyed, but asked Elsie if she thought she could find her way to the nursery. 'It is upstairs, the first turning to the right,' she said.

Elsie found her way without difficulty, as the sounds of infantile woe, which issued from the upstairs landing, showed plainly in what direction the nursery lay. As she opened the door, she became aware that the atmosphere

was worse by many degrees than that of the drawing-room, and that the small room was positively crowded with little figures. The nurse, a cheerful-looking person in a flannel apron, rose to receive her, continuing to pat the baby's back with one hand.

‘How do you do, nurse?’ said Elsie shyly. ‘Mrs. Battisley said I might come and see the children. Are they having their tea?’ And she looked around, wondering what had better be her next remark.

Four or five sickly-looking children sat at the table, eating bread and treacle, or rather smearing it upon their cheeks; while one little boy, apparently the black sheep of the flock, lay on his face on the floor, roaring at the top of his voice, and drumming on the carpet with his boots.

‘Yes, miss,’ said the nurse, ‘we are at tea. Master Cyril, stop that noise this moment. Miss Genevieve, take your fingers out of your mouth, and come and kiss the lady. You are very fond of children, I suppose, miss?’

‘Yes,’ said Elsie, when she had succeeded

in finding a spot free from treacle on Miss Genevieve's countenance; then having, at the nurse's bidding, gone through the like ceremony with the other four, and asked their names, she ventured to look at the baby, which now lay quiet sucking its bottle.

'It is a nice little thing,' she said. 'Is it a boy or a girl?'

'A girl, miss—Violet Claribel. Should you like to 'old her, miss?'

'Oh, don't take away her bottle,' said Elsie, 'she likes it.'

But the nurse, having given up her chair to Elsie, placed the baby, bottle and all, triumphantly on her lap, and it was not until Violet Claribel showed imminent symptoms of choking that Elsie hastily returned her to the nurse and took leave, without having addressed the remark which she feared was expected of her to Master Cyril, whose position on the floor remained unchanged.

Lady Eleanor took her departure as soon as Elsie came down, and heaved a long sigh of relief when she found herself once more in

the carriage. 'Well!' she asked when she had recovered a little, 'what did you think of the children? Did you see them *all*?'

'Yes,' answered Elsie, 'there are a great many. I thought them—I did not like them very much; but you know, Lady Eleanor, I am not really fond of children.'

'No?' said Lady Eleanor carelessly—'no more am I. And what did you think of the house?'

'I did not think it at all a nice house,' replied Elsie with decision.

'A poky little place, isn't it?' said Lady Eleanor.

'Yes, and it smelt—but one ought not to say such things,' said Elsie, checking herself. 'I don't suppose poor Mrs. Battisley can help it; she seems to have so many troubles.'

Lady Eleanor smiled a little, but did not speak until they had almost reached home; then she turned to Elsie and said very seriously: 'You have seen now what people who marry young, and without much means, invariably come to.'

CHAPTER II.

‘Admonish a friend : for many times it is a slander, and believe not every tale.’

LADY ELEANOR’S schemes were not so deep-laid but that they might have been perceived by any one less unsuspecting than Elsie. Furthermore, she could do nothing without a confidant. She did not take any of her nieces into her counsels ; Rosamond was too sharp-sighted for her, and Constance and Blanche too much occupied with themselves. Her plans and wishes were therefore reserved for her husband’s somewhat heedless ears ; and she took very good care that he should be her sole companion on her drive to Wroxbury the next day.

‘Elsie had no letter from David this morning, Frederick,’ she remarked when she

was seated beside her husband in his mailphaeton.

‘Indeed? What do you infer from that, my dear Eleanor?’

‘Why, it is now three weeks since she has had a letter, and if she were to take offence, and a coolness were to arise, I really don’t think the girl would be to blame.’

‘Some unforeseen cause——’ began Mr. Fitzgerald.

‘Oh, nonsense! it has been a foolish engagement from beginning to end, and if she takes my advice she will break it off. I would just as soon now, for her own sake, she did not get a letter—she will only be the more disappointed afterwards.’

‘Disappointed if David marries the young lady in India? I cannot think *that* would be a desirable connection.’

‘How stupid you are, Frederick! I declare one might as well talk to a—caravan!’ said Lady Eleanor, whose eye had roamed over the surrounding prospect until it lighted on a suitable comparison. ‘I should hope I

knew David better than to suppose there is a grain of truth in that ridiculous story of Mrs. Freeman's. I merely mean that I consider Elsie Ross totally unsuitable for David in every way. She is a very nice girl—I don't wish to detract from any one. If Lionel were a year or two older——'

'Lionel!' exclaimed Mr. Fitzgerald. 'My dear Eleanor, why, he is only eighteen, and as idle and careless a young scape-grace——'

'Lionel was nineteen in June, and you need not raise your voice so much—you will frighten the horses. I only say, *if* he were a year or two older. *And I say it*, to show how little personal feeling I have on the subject. My children's good is the only thing *I* consider.'

Nothing more was said on the matter until they had finished their business in Wroxbury; then Lady Eleanor laid her hand upon the reins—

'Let us go this way, and avoid the High Street,' she said. 'It is a short cut, though

it is dirty, and I am perished with cold ; do let us get home quickly.'

Mr. Fitzgerald obeyed, and they had reached the outskirts of the town, when he suddenly pulled up with an expression of annoyance—

'Dear ! I forgot to call at the post-office. How could we neglect such an important piece of work ? Had we gone through the High Street, as I wished, this would not have happened.'

'It was rather stupid, Frederick,' said his wife complacently, 'but it can't be helped now. You are not going to turn in this narrow lane ! I cannot have it—the horses will rear, and we shall be upset, besides, what does it matter ?'

'But the afternoon letters,' said Mr. Fitzgerald, 'and there is still a chance of Miss Ross hearing from David, you said.'

'No, there is not ; at least, it is most unlikely. My letter to David is half written, and will have to be posted to-night. I can't have her mind unsettled any more. Drive on, I insist upon it.'

Mr. Fitzgerald did not, in truth, care to have the trouble of turning back, especially as the light was waning and the roads beginning to freeze; so he drove on, after again bemoaning his forgetfulness.

You need not tell Elsie Ross you forgot the letters,' said his wife, when they drew up at the hall door. 'She would think it so unfeeling of you—which it was, perhaps; but she can quite well wait till to-morrow morning.'

On going indoors, Lady Eleanor found Elsie sitting in the parlour with Rosamond and little Mona. The child had brought out her favourite picture-book, *Struwwelpeter*, which had been one of Lionel's nursery treasures, to show to Elsie, who was reading the rhymes aloud to her. She stopped, and looked up expectant.

'Well, Aunt Eleanor,' said Rosamond, 'you look cold. What have you brought us in the way of gossip?'

'Nothing at all,' was the answer. 'I did not meet a soul I knew. It is freezing hard, and the roads are getting quite slippery.'

‘No letters even?’ said Rosamond. I am pining for home news. So is Miss Ross, I see,’ darting a keen glance at the girl.

‘Well, none of us have got any,’ replied her aunt shortly. ‘Why, Mona, I think that is Cousin Lionel’s old book. Ask Miss Ross to read to you about the naughty little boy who would not eat his soup.’

Lady Eleanor’s conscience smote her for the deception she had practised, but she was pleased to see that Elsie did not, at all events, show her disappointment openly. She read that story and several others, with a smiling face, and apparent unconcern. By and by Lady Eleanor gave her a meaning look, observing: ‘I must go to my boudoir, and finish my letter to David;’ and after a short interval Elsie rose and followed her.

‘Lady Eleanor,’ she said as she came in—‘is it about that report you are writing to David?’

‘Certainly,’ was the reply.

‘Then,’ said Elsie, ‘I have been thinking it over, and I would rather that you did not

say anything about me in your letter. You see, it is right for you to ask him, as you are his mother, but for me—I do not like to seem to insult him by any suspicion, so I would rather, please, not send a message.'

'Very well, my dear,' said Lady Eleanor rather coldly, 'I quite appreciate your motives. It is time this went to the post,' she added, and rang the bell. She then hastily wrote the concluding words, adding as a postscript, 'Elsie Ross very properly declines to send you any message.'

Having addressed the letter, she gave it to the servant, who stood waiting, with an injunction to send it to the village post-office at once.

Elsie remained a minute, wondering whether she had done right; she almost wished she had written to David herself, but it was evidently too late now, besides, she had no heart to write. She had felt so certain of her letter coming that afternoon, and now the darkest misgivings filled her mind. Either David must be ill, or he had forgotten her, and unable any longer to

repress her tears she left the boudoir hastily and went to her own room, trying to gain composure enough to appear as usual in the evening. In this she succeeded pretty well, and as one or two neighbours had come in to dinner it was easy to maintain an indifferent conversation. But it was an unspeakable relief when they went away, and the party separated for the night; when, alone with her own thoughts, she need no longer keep up the semblance of gaiety, when she might cry if she liked, unheard and undisturbed. She had scarcely had time to undress, however, and was standing before the fire unplaiting her long hair, when she was startled by a tap at her door. For a moment she was frightened; she had never quite forgotten Lady Eleanor's remark about noises, and her 'Come in' was uttered tremulously. But no ghost made its appearance; only a small woman's figure in a white dressing-gown, with dark wavy hair gathered into a thick loose plait, hanging over its shoulders. It was Lady Seathwaite.

‘May I come in?’ she said. ‘I am not a very good sleeper, and if you are not tired, I should be glad to have a chat with you. Do you mind?’

At any other time Elsie would have been as much pleased as surprised by Rosamond’s voluntarily coming to sit with her; to-night she would have much preferred to be alone, but made her visitor welcome, and placed her in the big arm-chair beside the fire.

‘I daresay you think me very impertinent,’ said Rose, as she regarded Elsie’s downcast face; ‘but you seem to me a poor little solitary thing, and I want to help you—if I can. Why are you so afraid of Aunt Eleanor, Elsie?’

‘I was rather rude to her the night I came,’ replied Elsie slowly, ‘because she gave me some advice I did not like. I thought she would be offended, although she was not. But I am always rather afraid of her—I don’t know why; I think it is because she is so beautiful.’

Rosamond listened with a half-amused

smile, and seemed determined to draw the girl out.

‘Then you make a great mistake—not in thinking her beautiful, for she is—no other word would express it—but in being afraid of her. Aunt Eleanor is not clever, you know; nobody minds what she says, and no sensible person ever takes her advice.’

These last words were said emphatically, and Elsie looked up in wonder. ‘Why not?’ she asked.

‘Because she would never take the trouble to give advice unless she had some private reason,’ said Rosamond curtly. She sat looking at the girl steadily, still with a half-smile about the corners of her mouth, and Elsie returned her gaze, wondering, perplexed, and yet fascinated.

‘I did not take her advice,’ she said; ‘at least, only part of it. It—was about David.’

‘Do not tell me more than you like,’ said Lady Seathwaite, ‘but if it would be any use to you, Elsie, you may trust me safely. I have experience’—she smiled

rather bitterly—‘and *I* have no motive or scheme in the matter.’

‘I do trust you,’ said Elsie; ‘I can’t help it. I have not heard from David for three mails’—her voice shook in spite of herself—‘and Lady Eleanor thinks—Lady Seathwaite, do you know anything of David? Can you think of any reason?’

Rosamond looked at the girl with great compassion, and taking both her hands, she drew her close to her.

‘My poor child,’ she said, ‘I know nothing of your David, except that he is nice and a gentleman; that I believe firmly. So that I am not exactly prepared to espouse the Miss Pratt theory—at least, I would give him the benefit of the doubt, if I were you. You have not written to break off your engagement, have you?’

‘No, no, I have not,’ said Elsie, inexpressibly comforted by Rosamond’s view of the matter; ‘I would not even send a message in Lady Eleanor’s letter, in case he might think I suspected him.’

‘She asked you to send a message, did she?’

‘Yes, she thought it would be better for me to send a message in her letter than to write myself.’

‘You don’t know what she said in her letter, of course?’

‘It was about the report of his engagement; Lady Eleanor thought it necessary to inquire about it.’

‘Elsie,’ said Rosamond, after a few moments’ thought, ‘I don’t know exactly what to say, not knowing David very well, but I don’t somehow put much faith in this report, which Aunt Eleanor makes so much of. If you really don’t believe it, as you say, why not write to David as usual?’

‘I wish I had,’ said Elsie, ‘and I thought of putting a note instead of a message inside Lady Eleanor’s letter, but I found there was not time.’

‘Not time, child!’ cried Rosamond, ‘why, the letters don’t leave the village till eight to-morrow morning. I don’t believe hers is gone yet.’

‘Yes it is—she sent it to the post at once, and was very particular about it. I certainly understood there was not time.’

Rosamond’s next proceeding filled Elsie with astonishment. ‘This is great fun,’ she said, clapping her hands; and, springing off her seat, she began to execute a kind of dance in the middle of the room. Presently she sat down again, and patted Elsie’s cheek.

‘You think I am mad, I suppose,’ she said, ‘but it is quite the contrary; a light has begun to break in upon my understanding. Aunt Eleanor wants to make you and David mutually disgusted with each other, and this is the way she takes to accomplish it.’

‘I know she would like to break off our engagement,’ observed Elsie astutely.

‘Then why do you let her, you little goose? Write to David now, bring the letter to my room when you have done it; my maid shall post it the first thing in the morning.’

‘How good you are to me!’ said Elsie—

‘but stay’—laying a detaining hand upon Rose’s arm as she was about to leave the room—‘I told Lady Eleanor I would not write unless I heard from David: I don’t think it is quite fair to write without her knowledge.’

‘You may hear by to-morrow morning’s post, since you are so scrupulous,’ said Rosamond. ‘The letters were never called for this afternoon; I have made out so much from Mr. Fitzgerald. So now I will leave you to make up your mind.’

Elsie did not hesitate long; she felt indignant at being thus deceived, and wrote as quickly as she could a short but characteristic letter to her lover, describing her visit to Alkerton without touching on any of the annoyances she had met with, and speaking warmly of Lady Seathwaite’s kindness to her. She added, that David’s silence had made her a little anxious, lest he should perhaps be ill, but that there was no doubt a letter for her at Chippingham, which Aunt Caroline would forward.

Elsie would have liked, in her present frame of mind, to confront Lady Eleanor with this letter in her hand, and upbraid her with her perfidy; but this was not to be thought of, for two reasons. In the first place, she could not betray Rose, who would dislike nothing more than being suspected of helping the oppressed; and in the second place, she could scarcely rouse her hostess, to say nothing of Mr. Fitzgerald, in the middle of the night for such a purpose. She disliked the idea of keeping the secret from her, and yet she disliked far more the thought that David might fancy she suspected him. 'For if he once thinks so,' thought Elsie, 'he must think so for ever: I can never clear myself, for how could I tell him that his own mother told lies in order to separate us?' Something of this she expressed to Lady Seathwaite when she came to her room with the letter.

'Oh, child!' said Rosamond sadly, 'I hope I have not misled you—I hope David

is worthy of it ; but I cannot see a creature in a trap and not try to let it out.'

'How could you guess it ?' asked Elsie.

'I know Aunt Eleanor,' was the answer, 'and I have had experience, as I told you. But go to bed, little cousin, we will talk more another time.'

They kissed each other, and Elsie retreated noiselessly to her own room.

CHAPTER III.

‘ Though hopeless love finds comfort in despair,
It never can endure a rival’s bliss !
But soft—I am observed.’

ELSIE received the expected letter the next morning, enclosed in one from Aunt Caroline. It was written in David’s usual cheerful and light-hearted strain, and he seemed perfectly unaware that any evil interpretation could be put upon his conduct. He had had a slight touch of fever, he said, but was now all right again. Not a word about Miss Pratt or any other lady, but a good deal about steeple-chases and polo, and he appeared delighted with the prospect of soon seeing active service in Afghanistan, a joy in which Elsie scarcely sympathised. The letter was as affectionate as usual, or even rather more so, and was perfectly satisfactory to its

recipient, though not, apparently, to Lady Eleanor ; for, on Elsie's reading her portions of it, she only remarked, with her usual logical precision, that David's not mentioning Miss Pratt did not prove that there was no such person,—but rather the reverse, to her mind. The last clause was put in as an afterthought, in order to counteract a distinct tone of triumph which she detected in Elsie's voice. Lady Eleanor always made a point of paying out, as it were, any one who had offended her by word or deed, either immediately or as soon after as she conveniently could ; she never neglected it, and, it may be presumed, looked upon it almost as a duty. In the present case, as Lionel was expected that day, and she was therefore in an especially pleasant and gracious mood, it was no spite or malice, but rather the strict principle of justice by which her conduct was always actuated which prompted this retort. In spite of herself she had taken a decided fancy to Elsie, and preferred her company to that of any of her nieces ; the girl's very presence

in the room soothed and pleased her, and she would have liked to have her always at hand to listen to her grievances, and to relieve her of small troubles. The liking was mutual; Elsie's former fear of Lady Eleanor showed that she had a charm for her, and the girl had a certain clinging affection for David's mother which all the last night's disclosures failed to weaken. Perhaps Elsie would have kept her anger longer had she not reflected that she had been a deceiver in her turn; but, whatever was the reason, the two were as good friends as ever.

Now that Elsie had got rid of her fears, and had found a friend in Lady Seathwaite, she began to enjoy her visit thoroughly. Constance and Blanche were now very civil to her, and Rosamond made no secret of her friendship. She did not talk much to Elsie in public, but would invite her to take walks with her, or to go with her to the nursery, where they would hold long conferences with little Mona for a third. Elsie soon became fond of the child, and liked to watch and

admire her friend's pretty ways with her and with all children, whom she seemed to understand instinctively ; and when the little Freemans or other juvenile neighbours came to tea with Mona, Rosamond generally managed to come and play with them. At other times Elsie talked to Rose freely, as she had never talked to any woman before ; her innocent confidences being received always with sympathy, often with peals of laughter ; then Elsie would laugh too, till any of the others who happened to be passing would wonder how any one *could* be so absurd and frivolous. For Lady Eleanor and Constance were not mirthfully inclined, and Blanche, though she could not help laughing sometimes, held a theory just then that laughter was rather beneath the dignity of a reasonable being. Blanche's theories were very strong at the time, but were liable to variation.

Lionel's coming made a pleasant variety, and he was welcomed by every one. He brought his cousin, Lord Heathfield, with him, a youth about his own age, who was

also at Christchurch. He was a quiet, gentlemanlike young man, whose appearance might be described by negatives. He was neither tall nor short, fair nor dark, plain nor handsome ; nothing was striking about him except his extreme neatness and tidiness, and his beautifully brushed hair, which he wore parted in the middle. He was an only child, the much loved and carefully brought up son of Lady Eleanor's brother, the Earl of Lynmouth ; and having been singularly well behaved from his infancy, he had always been held up as a model for Lionel's imitation. Lady Eleanor was, or seemed to be, really attached to her nephew, and made what her son was pleased to consider 'the most unnecessary fuss' about him. Lionel himself appeared to be well in health, and was overflowing with spirits. He delighted in playing practical jokes upon Heathfield, teasing his parents, and talking nonsense with his cousins, while with Elsie he assumed a brotherly and protecting air, keeping a watchful eye on her, and reproving her if

he saw anything amiss in her conduct. He disapproved of her intimacy with Rosamond, whose temper, he gravely assured her, was 'diabolical;' but as Elsie observed that he always found fault with her when she spoke to any one except himself, she paid no heed to his representations.

It was quite true that Rosamond, like the rest of the family, had her moods : some days she would be depressed, and would scarcely speak ; at other times a teasing and malicious spirit seemed to possess her, and she would take delight in making the most cutting speeches. Elsie was seldom the victim of her sarcasms, more often they were reserved for Lady Eleanor or her own sisters ; but Elsie soon learnt that the mental atmosphere at Alkerton, if not as oppressive as that of Chippingham, could occasionally be quite as unpleasant ; for there were days on which Lady Eleanor was, as Lionel phrased it, 'not to be trifled with,' Rosamond depressed, Mr. Fitzgerald irritating and captious, Lionel offended or morose, and the girls more or

less disagreeable. On these occasions she longed more than ever for David, whose cheerful, sunshiny disposition contrasted so strangely with the cloudy, unsettled moods of his family, and decided that David must resemble his father, as Lionel did his mother, in character as well as in face.

‘Lord Heathfield has no temper,’ she reflected, ‘but then he is utterly devoid of tact.’ Still she liked talking to Heathfield, and was pleased with his extreme politeness and quiet unselfish ways. Lionel soon found occasion to reprove her for this also.

‘Does Lord Heathfield hunt?’ she inquired innocently enough, as she and Lionel were watching the sunset from the lodge-gate one afternoon, hoping that the frost would not be too hard for hunting the next day. Lionel, who was engaged in breaking the ice on a cart-rut with his stick, did not answer till Elsie repeated her question, when he replied with severity—

‘You take too much interest in Heathfield; but if you imagine that he will be left at

home with you all day to-morrow, you are mistaken.'

'I don't imagine anything,' said Elsie hotly; 'but I think you are very rude, Lionel. If you can't answer a civil question——'

'Be calm,' said Lionel. 'Keep your temper, I beg. You asked me, I think, if Lord Heathfield hunts?'

Elsie moved a few steps away without answering, and Lionel, pursuing her, patted her arm soothingly.

'Yes, yes, he hunts,' said he, in a mock confidential tone. 'His parents wish him to hunt, so he hunts. It is a duty which his position demands—Hallo! here he is.'

At this moment they were joined by the unconscious subject of their remarks, who said to Elsie—

'Is it not too cold for you to be out, Miss Ross?—at least to loiter about? You really ought not, Lionel, to allow Miss Ross to get so chilled.'

'Why did you not bring her a railway rug and a foot-warmer, then?' retorted his cousin.

‘You really are most thoughtless, my dear fellow. Never go unprovided with them where you are likely to meet a lady.’

On their way to the house Heathfield asked Elsie if she would ride or drive to the meet the next morning. ‘If you ride,’ said he, ‘it would give me great pleasure to escort you home whenever you are tired.’

Elsie replied that she hoped to ride, as Lionel had promised to lend her his little mare, and Constance her habit. ‘But you must not think of coming back with us, Lord Heathfield,’ she said. ‘Blanche and I can surely find our own way home.’

‘I assure you,’ protested Heathfield, ‘nothing would give me greater pleasure.’

The frost gave way during the night, and the next morning, though damp and foggy, was suitable for hunting; and Elsie put on her habit with a feeling of pleasurable excitement. The meet was about four miles from Alkerton, and Lady Eleanor particularly desired the girls to come straight back, and not to follow the hounds, partly for fear of

accidents, and partly because she did not consider they had a sufficient escort. Blanche promised to attend to her aunt's directions, and Elsie, who knew nothing of hunting, determined to avoid mistakes by keeping close to her companion. They had to wait some minutes for Lionel, who was usually late, and by the time he came Blanche and Elsie were already mounted, the former on a steady old hunter, the latter on Lionel's little black mare Phyllis, who fidgeted and pranced with eagerness to be off. Heathfield, as soon as he mounted, drew near in order to soothe her, but Lionel speedily interfered.

‘Elsie,’ said he in a warning voice, ‘whatever you do, don't go near Heathfield on that mare—it is as much as his leg is worth. She perfectly hates that horse of his, and will kick him if you don't look out.’

‘I will ride with Blanche then, whose legs are both on the other side,’ said Elsie.

‘H'm, better ride on with me, and let them follow. As the horse is mine, I am willing to take the risk.’

Elsie having agreed to this magnanimous proposal, the two rode on in front, leaving Blanche to follow with Heathfield, and when he thought they were out of earshot Lionel asked her, 'Did I hear you promise to come straight home from the meet?'

'Blanche promised, and of course I will go back with her.'

'Well, Elsie,' said Lionel, 'attend to me. If Heathfield offers to go back with you, don't let him.'

Elsie looked a little puzzled. 'I don't want him to, and I don't suppose he wants to, but if he *should* insist upon it, how can I prevent him?'

'Any well-brought-up girl would know how to prevent him,' said Lionel, with a severely virtuous air. 'It would be most improper, and I wonder how you could let him make the proposal. May I ask what amuses you?' as Elsie broke into a laugh.

'Oh, Lionel, don't be offended; you are always being offended, and it is so tiresome

—but the idea of Lord Heathfield doing anything improper was too much for me !’

‘Well, it is not your fault if he doesn’t,’ said Lionel. ‘You needn’t go on like that,’ he continued sulkily ; ‘you don’t suppose it is pleasant for me to have to speak to you in this way. As David’s brother, it is my painful duty to—to be in a position to—take her short by the head, she is going to shy at that muck-heap—to advise you.’

‘Lionel,’ said Elsie, ‘it is no part of your duty to David to find fault with me every minute like this. He never did it himself, and I don’t believe he would wish it done.’

‘Never did it himself!’ said Lionel, raising his eyes to heaven. ‘Merciful Providence! what will she say next? David is an awfully particular beggar about certain things, and you know you were always fighting at St. Leonards, if I remember right. Wait till you are married. I shudder, Elsie’—here Lionel shook convulsively in his saddle, and turned a solemn gaze upon his companion—‘I shudder when I think of those domestic broils.’

Elsie only laughed gaily, and this time Lionel did not chide her merriment. After a while he said—

‘If you really want to go back directly I—I will go with you myself, if you like.’

‘Dear boy,’ said Elsie, much touched by this act of self-sacrifice, ‘do not think of such a thing—you, who are so fond of hunting! I would rather follow you all day and tumble off half a dozen times.’

‘Would you?’ said Lionel, his face lighting up. ‘Then come on. No fear of your tumbling off, you really sit very fairly well, considering.—Hallo! we are late—the hounds are gone, but I know what cover they are drawing. Follow me, never mind the others.’

At this moment, however, they heard the galloping of horses behind them, and the other two rode up.

‘You see, Lionel,’ said Heathfield, ‘that you have made us late. We waited full ten minutes at the door for you, and now we have lost the hounds.’

‘Lost your grandmother!’ retorted Lionel. ‘They are all down at that cover, as you may see if you use your eyes. Follow me, all of you—we’ll take a short cut,’ and so saying Lionel leaped the ditch into an adjoining field, followed promptly by Elsie.

Heathfield attempted a remonstrance, to which Blanche replied, ‘Stuff and nonsense! I’m not going home without seeing something, at any rate.’

At that moment the fox must have broken cover, for the hounds, giving tongue, streamed away, followed by the whole field. The line Lionel had taken soon placed him among the foremost riders, and Elsie kept close to him as long as she could. The little mare was so well trained that she had no difficulty in managing her, and the girl at first forgot everything in the excitement of the hunt. By and by, however, she remembered Blanche and her promise to Lady Eleanor, and drawing back a little to look for the others, she lost sight of Lionel. Still she followed the stream of hunters; they were

now going through some very heavy ground, and as they passed through a gap into a cart road she became aware, by a clinking sound, that one of Phyllis's shoes was loose, and presently it flew off altogether with a ringing noise. In distress she pulled up, and looked round, not knowing exactly what to do ; one rider after another passed her, Blanche among them, spattering her with mud as they went by ; but she did not see Heathfield anywhere.

They had all passed now, Elsie stood up in her stirrup, and surveyed the country in all directions—not a creature was in sight. 'There is only one thing to be done now,' thought she, 'and that is to go home. If I could only find my way to the village we passed through ; there is sure to be a blacksmith's forge there, and they could put on the shoe.'

She dismounted, picked up the shoe, and hung it on to the pommel of her saddle, then led Phyllis back to the field they had just quitted, picking her way cautiously amongst the mud-holes. Between the road and the

field was a stile, by means of which she managed with some difficulty to get on again, and then rode gently back, looking out for gaps and carefully avoiding stony places. The way seemed long, but she did succeed in reaching the village at last, and in finding the smith, who undertook to set all to rights in a very short time.

Elsie took all this very philosophically, but rather disliked waiting in the village, where she was an object of so much interest to all the idlers, and where several well-disposed persons were anxious to prove that she was severely hurt, had been thrown from her horse, and required instant medical assistance. Having, after what seemed to be an interminable time, got rid of these philanthropists and found herself again in the saddle, she proceeded joyfully on her way, and was not far from Alkerton when she met Heathfield, who rode hastily towards her with a countenance full of anxiety.

‘Miss Ross! thank heaven you are safe! I trust you have met with no accident?’

‘Phyllis cast a shoe,’ replied Elsie with composure. ‘I had to take her to the smithy. I am sorry you were looking for me, Lord Heathfield.’

‘I have been distracted with anxiety on your account,’ said Heathfield pathetically. ‘The moment I missed you I turned and searched for you everywhere. Lionel, careless fellow! never once looked behind him, and Blanche, I sadly fear, has quite forgotten her promise to my aunt, and has gone on with him. But now that *you* are safe my worst anxiety is assuaged.’

They reached Alkerton about three o’clock, and Elsie was rather coldly received by Lady Eleanor, who marked her displeasure not by saying anything to her, but by extolling Heathfield’s noble conduct in giving up his own hunting to look for her, which served to render the offences of the rest blacker by contrast.

Finding that Rosamond and Constance had gone out, Elsie changed her habit, put on her walking things, and went out in hopes

of meeting them. This she failed to do, nor did she meet Lionel and Blanche, who came in during her absence ; but before long she was joined by Heathfield, who entertained her with his conversation for nearly an hour and a half. Heathfield was very quiet in general society, but when he found a sympathetic listener his flow of talk never ceased, and Elsie was amused by the simplicity of his confidences. He described his home to her, and became eloquent on the subject of his parents' goodness and wisdom. This was the first Christmas in his life, he touchingly observed, that he had ever been separated from them, but they were then abroad, and it was their wish that he should accept their invitation to Alkerton, and endeavour to cultivate a little of his cousin Lionel's taste for field-sports.

‘And I cannot regret having come, Miss Ross, since I have had the pleasure of making your acquaintance. You understand me so well ! How I wish you knew my mother ; but you will be sure to see her when you

come to Lyn Court, which you will do, I hope, before very long, when she is able to claim you as a—as one of the family.’

Heathfield here lowered his voice, in delicate and confidential allusion to Elsie’s approaching marriage with David, and as such she understood it.

‘Thank you, Lord Heathfield,’ she answered; ‘I—hope so.’

His words, however, bore a different meaning to a listener who was concealed behind the bushes, for they were now passing through the shrubbery on their way to the house. Lionel and Blanche had come in about half an hour before, and after a good scolding from Lady Eleanor, to which neither of them paid much attention, Lionel had demanded where Elsie was.

‘There is no saying where she might have been,’ was his mother’s answer, ‘if dear, unselfish Basil had not brought her in—at the bottom of some ditch, most likely. None of you seem to consider,’ she added, turning to Blanche, ‘how exceedingly unpleasant it

is for me to sit waiting here all day, expecting every moment to see you girls brought in on shutters, with your necks broken.'

'Where is Elsie, then,' asked Lionel, 'since she is neither in a ditch nor on a shutter?'

'Gone out walking, I believe; she can never sit quiet for two minutes together.'

Lionel, upon this, went out to find Elsie, and demand an explanation of her conduct in leaving him. He had not gone many steps from the house before he caught sight of her and Heathfield pacing slowly along in the dusk, apparently in earnest conversation, and so engrossed with one another that they did not see him. This sight made him so indignant that he hastily turned into a side-walk to avoid them; then something Heathfield said arrested his attention, and he listened eagerly, but only caught the last few sentences, after which their voices became indistinct.

On returning to the house Elsie went to the nursery to visit little Mona, who was in bed with a bad cold, and whilst she was with her Lionel came in. Mona was very

fond of her cousin Lionel, who was always very kind and gentle with her. He sat down on the bed and began to talk and play with the child as usual ; but when Elsie, who supposed he had not seen her, asked him if he had had a good day's sport, he first took no notice at all, and then affected not to hear.

'I beg your pardon, Miss Ross, did you speak?' he said at length, when Mona had called his attention to the fact that Elsie was addressing him. Elsie, thoroughly provoked at his caprices, left the nursery presently, and laid wait for him at the foot of the stair, resolved, as she said to herself, 'to give him a good talking to' as soon as he came down. She had to nurse her wrath for about ten minutes, at the end of which time Lionel strolled leisurely out of the nursery, and was at once confronted by his cousin.

'Lionel, what is the meaning of this? I never saw such a boy as you are! What have I done to offend you now?'

'You needn't pretend that you don't know that.'

‘I couldn’t help leaving you,’ said Elsie. ‘Was it my fault that Phyllis cast a shoe? You ought to have seen that they were put on tighter.’

‘Cast a shoe, did she?’ said Lionel. ‘Well, no doubt Heathfield’s horse cast a shoe too?’

‘No, no! I never even saw Lord Heathfield until just as I was coming home. If you would only let me *explain* to you, Lionel.’

‘If you were to explain from now till to-morrow morning, it would make no difference,’ said Lionel. ‘When I think of the way you have behaved since——’

‘I have done nothing since, except go for a walk.’

‘*With* Heathfield.’

‘No, I met him.’

‘That was very curious,’ said Lionel with a sneer. ‘And it was quite an accident his proposing to you, of course.’

‘Lionel, I don’t think you are in your right mind. He never proposed to me—he

would as soon think of proposing to that gong!’

‘Nevertheless,’ said Lionel, unmoved by this strong figure of speech, ‘he did propose to you. I heard him with my own ears.’

‘He—did—not.’

‘He did! He did it in the shrubbery about half an hour ago.’

Elsie could only cast up her eyes and sigh. ‘Well,’ she said despairingly, ‘*I* didn’t hear him.’

‘That was a pity,’ said Lionel sarcastically.

He began to be a little staggered, and to think that possibly he had put a wrong interpretation upon what he had heard, but he would not let this appear for the world.

‘And since when,’ said Elsie, ‘have your ears become so sharp that you hear things——’

‘Which were not intended for them,’ put in Lionel.

‘No, which never happened. Where were you, perhaps, when you heard this?’

‘Behind the laurel bushes in the shrub-

bery,' replied Lionel, fixing a stern look upon her.

'And do you consider it the part of an honourable young man to skulk behind bushes to listen to people's proposals?'

'I only heard one,' said Lionel, moving away. 'I'll do you the justice to say I did *not* hear you propose to Heathfield—I dare say you did though.'

'Oh, indeed!' said Elsie in high indignation, and turning, she walked off to the library to join the rest.

Lionel's morose looks when he made his appearance there also were attributed by his family to hunger, but neither tea nor buttered muffins had power to soothe his sullen mood. After tea his cousins asked him to play to them, which he ungraciously refused to do, and retired into a corner with a book. The others took no notice of him, nor did they seem to be affected by his ill-humour; all, including Elsie, looking perfectly happy and comfortable. Rosamond, who seemed in unusually high spirits that afternoon, was

sitting on the rug with her back to the fire, talking with animation, and so amusingly that quite a circle of listeners collected round her. She was describing a visit which she and Constance had just paid at the parsonage, and her clever mimicry kept the others in fits of laughter, until Lady Eleanor, not seeing any fun in it herself, put a stop to it.

‘You are always turning up your nose at the people about here, Rosamond,’ said she. ‘I cannot see that they are any better about Seathwaite—worse, I should say—decidedly more vulgar. Besides, I do not think it right to laugh at a clergyman; it is forbidden somewhere in the Bible, I think—at any rate I don’t think it right.’

‘Dear Aunt Eleanor, how good you are! I wish we were all as well versed in the Scriptures. I am sorry you don’t like my stories, for now I am going to tell you another one—listen!’ and Rosamond began another anecdote, at which even Lady Eleanor could not help laughing a little, but Lionel still sat gloomily reading, his book

upside down, and Heathfield looked a little disapproving.

‘Dear Basil,’ said Lady Eleanor, ‘now get some nice book and read to us. You used to repeat poetry so charmingly when you were a little boy. I never could get Lionel to care for it.’

Heathfield said he was accustomed to read aloud in the evening to his parents, and would be glad to oblige his aunt in any way she pointed out.

A question now arose as to what poetry should be read aloud. Some one suggested Tennyson, but Heathfield, after a search in the shelves, brought out a volume of Wordsworth, which he recommended as being ‘more chaste.’ He really read well, and thus the hour before dinner passed pleasantly enough to all but Lionel, who, after listening to the first few lines, rose and left the room with dignity.

Lady Eleanor began to feel a little anxious about the state of her son’s health ; his boyish illnesses used often to be preceded by fits of

ill-humour, but she had hoped that he had outgrown them. She came to his room before dinner, and spoke to him seriously about his rudeness during his cousin's reading. 'Dear Heathfield is too good-tempered even to seem put out, but really, Lionel, you were quite insulting. It was as if you could not bear to listen, and I am sure nothing could be nicer.'

Lionel, in reply, informed his mother that 'it was one of his principles never to listen to rot'—so he designated his cousin's favourite poems; he found it deteriorated his whole moral nature; then abruptly changing the subject, he besought her to put a stop to the flirtation which was going on between Heathfield and Elsie. Lady Eleanor laughed at him.

'I don't see that there is anything going on,' she said, 'and if there were, it is no affair of yours. You can't be well, Lionel, or you would not be so fanciful. I hope you have not been hanging over Mona. Have you any feeling of sore throat?'

Lionel had been standing before the glass in his shirt-sleeves whilst his mother was speaking; he now turned round upon her with flashing eyes, and a hair-brush in each hand. 'Of course I have!' he replied, 'it is enough to give anybody a sore throat to see the way they go on; but you have none of you any proper feeling. I am sure I don't know what Heathfield's blessed parents will say to you, and as for David——'

'Lionel, dear, you are too foolish; don't excite yourself so. Elsie is going home in a day or two, and if Heathfield is a little taken with her, it will do him no harm. He is only nineteen, you know; but come, there is the dinner gong; do not dawdle, Lionel, you know your father hates you to be late.'

'Odd,' thought Lady Eleanor as she went downstairs, 'all the young men are quite foolish about that girl. There is Lionel now, quite jealous of Heathfield. Well, she would make a nice little daughter-in-law, if only it were Lionel instead of David. It is those clever women that I cannot stand who

are always seeing things that are not there.'

This last reflection was suggested by Rosamond, who had come downstairs behind her, and who said, as she smilingly put an arm round her neck, 'A penny for your thoughts, Aunt Eleanor! I can see you are revolving some dark scheme in your brain.'

Lionel did not speak to Elsie during the whole of that evening, and this made her very unhappy, as she expected to leave Alkerton in two days, and it might be long before she saw him again. The next morning she looked anxiously for some signs of relenting; he avoided her studiously, but more, she thought, from pride than from ill-will, and seeing him loitering aimlessly about in the shrubbery, she resolved to make it up with him.

'Lionel, dear,' said she affectionately, putting her arm within his, 'what o'clock is it?'

Lionel regarded her with a suppressed smile of triumph, and pulled out his watch.

‘It is now,’ said he, ‘the witching hour of ten minutes to one. What is your reason for asking?’

‘Only,’ said Elsie, ‘that you said once you would show me the pigs, and I thought there might be time before luncheon.’

‘Come on then,’ said Lionel with alacrity, and pulling his cap over his forehead, he set out at a good pace.

The others watched them from the windows with some amusement, knowing that they had not been on speaking terms; for it was a standing joke that the two were always quarrelling, and yet never could be separated, and although they might go forth apparently the best of friends, they were apt to fall out by the way, and if they came in together (which they rarely did), it was generally with the width of the road between them. Lionel now walked off through the muddy fields so fast that it was difficult for Elsie, who had to pick her steps, to keep up with him.

‘Come along, Elsie,’ said he admonish-

ingly. 'If you really want to see the pigs, there must be no stopping to look about you. Mind your feet—it's a little damp just here.'

He marched on through a perfect sea of mud, which lay at the entrance of the farm enclosure, and when he reached the other side, cast a look back to see whether his companion would venture to follow; but perceiving that Elsie, having 'kilted' her dress, was prepared to encounter the passage without a murmur, he relented, and desired her to wait until he laid down a plank for her to step on. He then opened the door of a yard, and they found themselves in the presence of a company of curious-looking red-haired pigs with black spots, which collected round them, grunting and squeaking.

'Well, what do you think of them?' asked Lionel.

Elsie was doubtful. 'I am not a *very* good judge of pigs,' she said. 'If they were cattle I should know better; but I don't think them so handsome as the Berkshire pigs my father keeps.'

‘That’s all you know about it!’ returned Lionel. ‘This is the genuine old English swine, descended from the herd which Gurth and Wamba kept, beneath these spreading’—here he looked up, but as there were no oaks above his head, or any other trees, he substituted—‘skies. Come and look at the young ones.’

He opened the door of a little thatched shed, where lay the mother sow surrounded by her family.

‘Ah, these are pretty!’ cried Elsie, ‘they are the colour of tortoiseshell kittens—and what active little beasts. Poor old lady!’—addressing the sow affectionately. ‘Lend me your stick, Lionel, till I scratch her back.’

‘*Till* you scratch her back!’ said Lionel, turning away his head in affected disgust, as he yielded up his cane. ‘What a *fearful* Scotticism!’

‘Oh, Lionel!’ said Elsie rather inattentively, as she leaned forward to reach the sow’s other side; ‘you know I never speak Scotch.’

They were half-way on their walk home before Elsie suddenly observed with complacency, 'I am generally taken for an Englishwoman.'

'Oh, are you?' said Lionel. 'Now, I daresay David told you that—there's nothing that fellow won't say. I wouldn't have the lies he tells upon my conscience if you paid me!' and Lionel put his head back, and snuffed the air with a proud consciousness of integrity.

'Lionel!' said Elsie firmly, 'I cannot allow you to say things like that about David, even in fun. It is not even as if he were in this country. If you wish to abuse David, you must walk with somebody else.'

But Lionel only walked on smiling, and declined to quarrel. He possessed his mother's stern sense of justice, which led him to pay Elsie out for her former offence, but this done, he considered that she was punished sufficiently.

CHAPTER IV.

‘ Before the days of change still is it so ;
By a divine instinct men’s minds mistrust
Ensuing danger ; as by proof we see
The waters swell before a boisterous storm.
But leave it all to God.’

ELSIE had fully intended returning to Chippingham for Christmas ; but she was so beset with entreaties to remain, that she wrote to Aunt Caroline for another week’s leave of absence, which was graciously accorded to her. She was glad of this, for she had rather disliked the idea of Christmas at Chippingham, with all its bustle of church decorations, school treats, and parish teas. Last year she had quite enjoyed them, for David had been there, but she dreaded going through it all without him, and being condoled with by all her friends on this circumstance.

A day or two before Christmas an addition

to the party at Alkerton arrived in the person of Mr. Douglas Ferrars, Constance Mortimer's accepted suitor. He was a wealthy, middle-aged man, a successful barrister, and possessed besides of a good private fortune. Lady Eleanor always spoke of him as a 'very civil little man,' and this described him well. He had no turn for field sports of any kind, and as he did not smoke, he usually sat with the ladies, and took walks with Constance, to whom he behaved with great deference. Neither Rosamond nor Blanche seemed to have much regard for their future brother-in-law, indeed Rose was often exceedingly rude to him, and he disliked her proportionally. But every one else tolerated him, and Constance was filled with serene self-importance, and, it is to be presumed, returned the politely expressed affection of her *fiancé*.

It was Christmas Eve, and a bright frosty afternoon. The engaged pair had gone for a walk, and the others had waited to give them a start, and collected at the window to watch and comment upon them as they issued

forth. Lady Eleanor, entering the library, found them thus employed.

‘Now I call it perfectly disgraceful of you all to stand spying upon poor Constance in that way,’ she said. ‘How would you like it yourselves? It is nothing but idle, vulgar curiosity—I am sure Mr. Ferrars is most harmless. If you really want something to do, I wish some of you, at least, would walk to Bulcote and inquire for Mr. Freeman, he has got erysipelas in his face.’

All declared their willingness to start on this errand, but as they said they were too large a party, each eagerly proposed to be the one to stay at home. At length Rosamond and Elsie set out, escorted by Lionel, while Heathfield and Blanche went to see if the ice on the pond would soon be fit for skating.

‘Do you think we need go in?’ said Rosamond. ‘Won’t it do just to inquire at the door?’

Elsie thought it would, but Lionel, to his cousins’ surprise, insisted on going in, to

which they yielded the more readily, as it was impossible to make the faithful Blencowe understand their questions. They found Mrs. Freeman alone, the young people having gone to decorate the church. She received them with her usual simple friendliness, and said that her husband was better, but not yet able to see any one. At this Lionel's face fell perceptibly.

‘Should you mind taking a note for me to Lady Eleanor?’ said Mrs. Freeman, as they rose to go. ‘I had just begun to write it as you came in. Will you sit down a moment, Lady Seathwaite, whilst I finish it? I am sorry to keep you waiting,’ she said as she wrote, ‘it is about a marriage Lady Eleanor was interested in, which has taken place in India, but after all it is no one she knows, my sister had made a mistake in the name.’

Lady Seathwaite turned her beautiful face, and slowly winked her eye at Elsie, while Lionel sat perfectly still, apparently absorbed in thought.

Once out of the house, the three looked at one another, and Rosamond held up the note in triumph.

Lionel took it from her. 'It is impossible,' said he with solemnity, 'to stand this state of suspense any longer. For Elsie's sake, it is absolutely necessary to know what is inside.' And so saying, he calmly tore open the note, and began to read it aloud.

Elsie protested. 'Lionel, how dare you open letters? I—I don't need to know, I don't *want* to know what is inside.' But Lionel did not take the least notice.

Mrs. Freeman's note was somewhat unintelligible, and was full of excuses and expressions of regret, very hastily written, but enclosed was a scrap of an Indian letter from her sister, on which Lionel read—

'“Miss Pratt's marriage took place last week at the English church at”—Jumbledebad, it looks like—“and I am told the bride really looked very well, though I am not an admirer of her *style*. All our efforts were useless, as the Pratts followed the poor foolish

young man all the way to"—to—Punch—Poon—I can't read it, never mind'—said Lionel breaking off—"and the father demanded what his intentions were, so there was no getting off. I made a sadly stupid mistake in my former letter, the bridegroom's name is Leslie, not Lindsay; he calls himself Leslie of Cowiebyres, although I understand the property is sold. There is a Mr. Lindsay, also a Scotchman, in the regiment, which may have confused me, though I know both young men perfectly well. The bridegroom, Mr. Norman Leslie, is short and red-haired; his wife is about three inches taller. She is handsome but *bold-looking*; I hope they may be happy, although for my part"—here the sheet was torn in two.

'What a gossip the woman must be!' cried Rosamond. 'Well, Lionel, so you are not to have Miss Pratt for a sister-in-law—what a disappointment! Now give me back the letter.'

'No, no, leave it with me, I'll explain it

to my mother. I'll just go on in front, and set her mind at rest ; you follow at your own pace,' and Lionel started off at headlong speed.

'He is up to some mischief,' said Rosamond shrewdly, 'but never mind, Aunt Eleanor deserves it.'

'Will she be angry at his opening the letter ?' asked Elsie.

'Not a bit ; she might have been if any one else had done it, but Lionel may do as he pleases.'

When they reached the house they found Lady Eleanor in a state of considerable perturbation, not having yet deciphered Mrs. Freeman's note, and having been assured by her son that that lady had given them a circumstantial account of David's marriage with Miss Pratt, which had just been solemnised by the Bishop of Calcutta, the bride's father keeping a drawn sword in his hand during the ceremony, to prevent any attempt at escape on the part of the bridegroom.

Thus Lady Eleanor's little scheme was

entirely frustrated and turned against herself, and she began to think seriously that she had better let David and Elsie alone for the future, and that, after all, it was very wrong to oppose the decrees of Providence. She therefore followed her natural inclination and was cordial, and even affectionate, to Elsie, thus making the girl perfectly happy for the time.

Elsie had never before spent a Christmas Eve so pleasantly, nor amid so much laughter, for the young people rehearsed the tableaux which they proposed to have the next week for the entertainment of the neighbourhood, to their own intense amusement. Mr. Fitzgerald, however, would not let them sit up after twelve o'clock struck, so they all gathered at the front door, to hear the village bells proclaiming that it was Christmas morning, and then went to their rooms.

Elsie stirred her fire, and sat down to think, for she did not feel sleepy. The house grew very quiet, the flame died away, and the noise of the ashes falling into the

grate at last roused her, and made her think it was high time to go to bed. She opened the window first for a moment to look out, and listen if she could still hear the chimes. No! they had stopped, but a strange sound, strange at least at that time of night, made her heart beat quickly. It was as if a heavy carriage were coming rapidly up the drive—coming nearer and nearer, with a distinct crunching sound upon the gravel. As the sound came close under her window, Elsie involuntarily drew in her head and started back, overcome with a strange terror; then in a moment she heard the carriage stop before the door. She waited, expecting to hear a bell, but there was no sound, nor any stir in the house, and in a minute or two she took courage to look out again into the bright moonlight. By stretching her head far out, she could just see the open space in front of the door, but the black shadow cast by the porch lay upon it, and she could distinguish nothing.

‘Very strange!’ she said to herself, ‘I certainly heard it stop,’ then, as she stood

musings, a sudden thought darted into her mind, a remembrance of a story Aunt Grizel had told her, how there was a superstition that before a Lindsay died, a ghostly carriage was heard at midnight, by some one connected with the family. The very terror of this thought gave Elsie energy. 'It must be a real carriage,' she said, 'I must see it,' and snatching up a light, she dashed down the stairs to the front door. It was locked and barred, and rather than waste time in undoing the fastenings, she hurried into the smoking-room, which was on the ground-floor, and one of the windows looked out upon the entrance. She went behind the curtain, undid the shutter hastily, and flung it open; but everything was still and quiet, and a light covering of new-fallen snow lay on the gravel, which was unmarked by wheel or hoof-print.

Elsie staggered back into the room, where she had left her candle burning on the table: a tall, dark figure had risen from an arm-chair, and was standing beside it.

She shrieked, but the next moment Lionel's voice reassured her. 'Elsie! Elsie, is that you? By Jove, I thought you were a ghost! Has anything frightened you?'

'Oh, Lionel!' gasped Elsie, clinging to his arm in her terror, 'how you startled me! Why are you not in bed?'

'I fell asleep, I suppose,' said Lionel. 'Is it late? how beastly cold it is! but you—you are shaking all over, and your hands are like ice. What is the matter, Elsie?'

'I—heard rather an odd noise,' said Elsie, trying to recover herself. 'I thought it was——'

'Burglars?'

'No, a carriage coming up the avenue, but it wasn't one really.'

Elsie fancied that Lionel gave a slight start when she mentioned the carriage, but his face did not change. He went to the window and looked out; then, without a word, he carefully fastened the shutter again.

'I'll tell you what's the matter with you, Elsie,' said he, 'your nerves have completely

gone to the dogs. You've been drinking too much tea, that's what plays puck with the nerves.'

He lit another candle, which he gave her, took hers, which was nearly burnt to the socket, for himself, and still holding her hand, he gravely led her upstairs, as if she had been a child. Had Elsie not seen Lionel she would scarcely have dared to go back to her room, but would have wakened Rose, or one of her sisters ; but this meeting with him had driven away all ghostly terrors from her mind. She went to bed and slept, but her rest was disturbed by a curiously vivid dream, and she woke again before it was light. She had just fallen into a most refreshing slumber when it was time to get up, and therefore did not appear downstairs until most of the party had finished breakfast, and discussed the news of the day.

'I am sorry to be so late on Christmas morning, Lady Eleanor,' she said. 'Am I the very last ? No, Lionel is not down.'

'Poor Lionel seems to have taken one of

his bad sore throats,' said Lady Eleanor. 'I knew it was coming on some time ago; it is very odd how misfortunes always come together.'

Elsie did not like to ask what other misfortune had occurred, she felt sure that whatever it was, every one was tired of the subject by that time; so she finished her breakfast in silence, the rest of the party being engrossed in their Christmas cards.

As they left the room, however, she lingered to ask Lady Eleanor how Lionel was.

'Oh, well, I don't think he is very bad, my dear, but it is provoking his taking these sore throats; I thought he had outgrown them. By the bye, he wanted to see you, Elsie, but you will have to get ready for church now, I think you are late as it is. You will find him sitting in my boudoir when you come home.'

Elsie missed Lionel sadly during the walk to church, which was in a village called Monk's Leighton, half-way between Alkerton

and Bulcote. It was a fine old church, and its outside left nothing to be desired ; within, it was fitted with old-fashioned, high, square pews, which took away from the idea of its size and grandeur. The pews, moreover, smelt damp and musty ; and the congregation had to be content with very hard cushions and very dirty old straw hassocks. All the way up the aisle they trod on gravestones, and on the church wall, inside the pew, there was a monumental slab, which recorded the virtues of generations of deceased Pophams. These were obscured, however, on the present occasion, by the garlands of holly and ivy with which the church was festooned.

The Freemans were there in force, even Mr. Freeman, his face bound up in a red silk handkerchief, had bravely ventured forth to do honour to Christmas Day.

Elsie would have enjoyed the service more had she not felt like a sheep in a pen, owing to the inconvenient number which were crowded into the high square pew. She sat next to Heathfield, who sang lustily,

but very much out of tune, and insisted on sharing his hymn-book with her. Mr. Douglas Ferrars sat opposite, and seemed much embarrassed as to how to dispose of his hat; when seated, he nursed it affectionately upon his knees, and when obliged to rise, he placed it carefully on the floor, and was evidently very nervous lest somebody should kneel upon it. Had Lionel been present, he would have been tempted to do so accidentally, and Elsie began to think that, after all, his absence was not an unmitigated evil.

She went to see him as soon as they reached home, and found him sitting by the fire in his mother's boudoir, which was carefully screened from draughts. It opened into Lady Eleanor's bedroom, and she looked in as Elsie entered.

'Don't let him talk much, Elsie,' she said anxiously, 'he ought to be in bed. Just feel his hand—how feverish. Lionel, dear boy, are you sure you don't feel chilly? Well, Elsie may stay and amuse you for half

an hour, but pray don't excite him, my dear.'

'Elsie,' said Lionel, 'if it would lessen your anxiety to feel my pulse, I give you leave.' Then as Lady Eleanor left the room, he went on quickly, 'No, don't let us waste time that way. How are *you* this morning, Elsie, and have you heard any more carriages?'

'Oh, Lionel! was it that open window which gave you cold? I am so sorry.'

'Nonsense! lucky for me you came in, or I might have been sleeping in that arm-chair now. But tell me the whole story.'

Elsie, willing to humour him, told him all that she had thought she heard.

'And so you thought it was the Corinthian coach?'

'I could not help thinking of it, but I did not know you knew the story.'

'Of course I know the story,' said Lionel. 'Have not David and I been "deaved" with it, as our old nurse Ailie would have said, ever since we were babies in arms? but I

should have thought you had more sense than to believe such rot.'

'I never thought before whether I believed it or not. Aunt Grizel said she didn't, but it always sounded very awful as she told it. If I had been "deaved" with it like you, perhaps I should have thought it nonsense too.'

'And what was your version, then?'

'Once,' said Elsie, 'there was an old Lord Corinzean who was very wicked. I don't know when he lived. Aunt Grizel thought it was sixteen hundred and something, but she wasn't sure. He had some deadly enemies; and one day when he was driving in his coach between Brechin and Forfar——'

'My story says King's Kettle and Falkland—but go on.'

'Two of his enemies laid wait to murder him, and each of them put in his pistol through the opposite coach-windows, and shot him dead where he sat. And then they set him bolt upright on the cushions, and

told the coachman to drive home to Corinzean Castle, and not to say a word for his life. And when he got to the castle, his lady came down to the door, and when she looked into the coach, there was her husband's dead body sitting in it. And she gave one shriek, and became a *raving maniac* !'

'A gibbering idiot, my story says,' observed Lionel, 'but I see we're agreed on the main points.'

'Your story is more likely to be the correct one,' said Elsie, after thinking a minute, 'because Corinzean Castle is south of the Tay, and the coachman could not drive across the water.'

'That is a mere detail,' said Lionel, 'but proceed.'

'And since ever that awful night,' continued Elsie, unconsciously imitating her Aunt Grizel, 'a coach and four drives up to Corinzean Castle at the dead hour of the night—but it leaves no mark upon the gravel. And they say it may be seen and heard at other places, by any one who is of kin to the

Lindsays—but then it goes before a death. That is the way Aunt Grizel always ended,’ said Elsie, ‘but it was not easy to get her to begin. And she used to say “Hoots, nonsense!” and get quite cross if I questioned her about it.’

‘Be sure you say nothing to the mother about having heard a carriage,’ said Lionel. ‘She hates the story like poison, and it would put her in a mortal fright. She would think it was the Corinthian coach whenever any one came to call.’

‘You ought not to talk, Lionel,’ said Elsie. ‘Is your throat very sore?’

‘Rather. I shan’t be able to go to old Ardvoira’s funeral, which is a blessing.’

‘I did not know he was dead,’ said Elsie, startled.

‘What, didn’t you hear? the news came this morning. I ought to congratulate you, for of course Ardvoira is David’s now.’

‘Ah, don’t!’ said Elsie, shuddering. ‘Lionel, perhaps that noise might have meant him.’

‘Much more likely it meant me,’ replied Lionel cheerfully. ‘He was not a Lindsay, but a Macdonald; besides he must have been dead some time before you heard it.’

‘Do you know the Corinzean people, Lionel? Are any of them likely to die?’

‘I hope they will,’ replied Lionel, ‘on David’s account, but I fear they won’t. His present lordship is subject to d. t.’s, I believe, and his son, the Master, takes epileptic fits. The Corinzeans have always drunk like fishes; it is to be hoped David won’t take to it, but I think it only right to mention——’

‘Now, Lionel, you have talked quite enough. I am going.’

‘No, I haven’t—don’t go. The mother will come back—never fear, and turn you out. Tell me some more ghost stories, I am just in the humour,’ and Lionel laid himself back comfortably, and arranged a pillow under his head.

‘I don’t know any more,’ said Elsie, ‘but I will tell you an odd dream I had last night; generally one forgets dreams, but I remember

this one distinctly. I was at Rossie, lying in a bed there, but somehow it did not seem to be my own room ; and I saw Euphemia and Marjorie sitting over a fire, whispering together and crying—but I could not hear what they said. And suddenly a carriage drove up to the door, and a bell rang—twice. And they were frightened, and I awoke. Then I went to sleep again, and dreamt the same thing : that I was at Rossie, and somebody sat in the room crying, but this time it was your mother. And she cried bitterly, and wrung her hands, and I wanted to get to her and comfort her, but I could not, because there was something between. And then somehow I was out of doors, and although it was dark I could see everything perfectly well ; the Michaelmas daisies were in flower—it must have been autumn—and they reminded me that I was dead. And I felt so light and happy, and said, “How foolish to be troubled about anything, because of course I am dead.”’

‘Why should Michaelmas daisies remind

'you that you are dead?' inquired Lionel, not unnaturally.

'I don't know,' said Elsie, 'except that they always do remind me of graves; they grow in the churchyard at St. Ethernans. It was an odd dream, was it not?'

'I see nothing odd about it,' said Lionel discontentedly; 'a common domestic nightmare. It was the natural consequence of rushing about the house in that idiotic way—you must have eaten something which disagreed with you.'

'Here comes your mother,' said Elsie. 'She will scold me for letting you talk.'

'Lionel, dear,' said Lady Eleanor, 'what could you take for luncheon—a little soup? Do go to bed at once to please me—you are quite feverish. Have you been talking?'

Lady Eleanor was always a good deal perplexed in cases of illness; she did not know what to do, and felt aggrieved, as though the patient had done it on purpose to annoy her. But her mind was at present full of medical ideas, as she had just come

from a discussion upon Mr. Macdonald's death, which, she assured her husband, was entirely brought about by his own carelessness. Had he only used common prudence there was nothing to prevent him living until David came home from India, which would have been so much more convenient for every one.

Lionel declared he had scarcely uttered a word. 'Elsie has been telling me stories,' he said. 'She has had nightmare from eating too many mince-pies.'

'Dear me, Elsie, I wish you would not,' said Lady Eleanor, turning to her reproachfully. 'I really can *not* have another person ill in the house. Mince-pies! how dreadfully unwholesome! How many did you eat, child?'

'I am quite well, Lady Eleanor,' said Elsie, 'don't believe Lionel. And I don't like mince-pies, though I did eat one last night, for luck.'

'I don't see much luck,' said Lady Eleanor, 'pray don't do it again. I do

dislike vulgar superstition. Two misfortunes have happened already, for I can't take you girls to those dances next week; I shall be in mourning; and now I have no doubt there will be a third, they always come in threes. I am quite prepared for it.'

The calamity which Lady Eleanor foresaw was not long in coming. The party went down in the afternoon of the following day to the village school, to assist at a Christmas tree, which was lighted up for the benefit of the children on the estate. The presents had been given, and Elsie was busy distributing little bags of sweets, which were cut down for her by Heathfield, when she was aware of a sort of hubbub in the room, a feeling in the air, which warned her that something unusual had occurred. She looked round—Rosamond had disappeared, so had Constance, and Blanche seemed in the act of following them.

'Where is Constance gone?' she asked Heathfield.

'She was called out a minute or two ago,'

was the answer. 'Some one said Rosamond wanted her.'

'Let us make haste and finish,' said Elsie. 'I am afraid somebody is ill.'

'Perhaps faint,' suggested Heathfield. 'I hope you do not feel so. The heat of this room must be very overpowering to a lady.'

'I am not faint,' said Elsie, 'but I am sure something is wrong. Please be quick, Lord Heathfield—never mind that wire.'

But Heathfield conscientiously insisted upon stripping the tree completely, and not defrauding a single child of the smallest nut or raisin, before he suffered Elsie to depart. As they approached the house, they saw Douglas Ferrars and Mr. Fitzgerald talking earnestly; presently the latter went in, and Mr. Ferrars came forward to meet them.

Heathfield at once inquired whether anything unusual had taken place, and Mr. Ferrars replied in a highly indignant tone of voice: 'Why, yes, something rather singular, I must say. Lady Seathwaite's

husband has disappeared ; they have actually sent a servant here to look for him.'

'What !' exclaimed Elsie.

'Yes, you are surprised,' continued Mr. Ferrars ; 'so was I. Naturally I was surprised ; but the family ought surely to have known of Sir Roger's state. He has escaped from his—from whoever had the charge of him ; nobody knows where he is ; Lady Seathwaite is going home to-morrow morning, and I hear she actually proposed—either she or Lady Eleanor—that Constance should go with her !'

'Poor Rosamond, how distressing !' said Heathfield. 'Constance would naturally wish to be with her sister at such a crisis, but it is hard upon you, Ferrars.'

The indignant Mr. Ferrars began to launch forth into some rather uncomplimentary remarks about Lady Seathwaite, which Heathfield checked in his quiet way, reminding him that Miss Ross was present, but when he looked round Elsie had vanished.

She hurried in as soon as she heard that Rose was to leave Alkerton the next morning, and went to look for her. Guided by the sound of voices, she went into the parlour just as Lady Eleanor was leaving it, and Elsie heard her say as she did so, 'Well, do as you please, Rose, but *I* don't think you ought to go alone.'

Rosamond had risen, and was standing with one foot on the fender; Constance and Blanche were sitting on either side of the hearth, looking at her and at each other in a doubtful, uncomfortable sort of way. None of the three took any notice of Elsie, as she drew near and regarded the little group with troubled eyes.

'Well,' said Rosamond at length, in rather a hard little voice, 'family councils are rather a waste of time, are not they? I must go and speak to Thérèse.'

She put her hand lightly on Elsie's shoulder as she passed her. 'Come and help me to pack,' she said. 'You know I am off to-morrow morning, don't you, Elsie?'

‘I only heard it this moment,’ said Elsie.
‘Are you going, Blanche? or Constance?’

‘I cannot go—very well,’ said Constance,
‘but I should think Blanche might. Stay a
moment, Rose, where is your hurry about
packing?’

‘Well,’ said Blanche, ‘you know how
particular mamma is, and that I am a great
deal younger than you—but if you think it
would not be considered *odd*——’

‘We have discussed all that before,’ said
Rose. ‘I can go alone perfectly well,’ and
she left the room quickly. Elsie was about
to follow her, but stopped a moment to say to
Constance, ‘Does Thérèse not go with her?’

‘No,’ replied Constance, ‘she is going to
leave Mona here, with Thérèse to look after
her. But I must say, Blanche, I think it is
rather selfish of you——’

‘Selfish!’ retorted Blanche, ‘of course I
would go if there was any necessity; but I
am not going to do your work just to please
Douglas Ferrars. What do you think,
Elsie?’

‘I think,’ said Elsie rather timidly, ‘that if neither of you can go, perhaps I might.’

‘Oh!’ said Constance, ‘it is very kind of you, Elsie, but you would not like it, and——’

‘Yes, I would,’ said Elsie. ‘I should like it very much, if Rose did not think me in the way.’

‘In the way—oh no!’ cried both sisters; ‘but you have no idea what a horrid journey it is, and what a cold house——’

‘I will go and see if Rose will take me,’ said Elsie eagerly, and ran upstairs.

Elsie had some little difficulty at first in persuading Rosamond to let her go with her to Seathwaite; she felt somewhat shy of making the proposal, for, much as she wished to be of use to her friend, she was afraid of seeming forward or officious. Rosamond declared she needed no one, and was quite able to take care of herself; but the moment Elsie detected by her manner that she was really a little hurt at her sisters’ selfishness, and that she had fully intended to take one

of them with her, she became very firm, and declared that it was now quite settled, and she must go and pack her clothes.

‘But your aunt, my child. Won’t she think me a demon?’

‘I don’t think so,’ said Elsie. ‘I don’t think Aunt Caroline’s opinion need prevent my going.’

‘And Aunt Eleanor? have you asked her leave?’

‘No, but I will go and ask her now, and I can pack whilst she makes up her mind.’

Elsie was as good as her word, and the making up of Lady Eleanor’s mind was indeed a work of time. She had been half persuaded already by Constance and Blanche that it would be an excellent thing for Elsie to go with their sister, but, on the other hand, she had the fear of Aunt Caroline and also of Lionel before her eyes. Lionel’s objections to the plan were very strong and decided, but as he was now in bed, and only able to speak with difficulty, they

were overruled; and as Elsie was anxious to go and Rosamond to take her, his proposal of detaining her by force was not attended to.

CHAPTER V.

‘Uncover ye his face, she said.
O changed in little space !
She said, O pale that was so red !
O God ! O God of grace !
Cover his face.’

THE travellers made an early start, and by ten o'clock were fairly on their way. There was an inch or two of snow on the ground when they left Alkerton ; and Elsie expected to find deeper snow on the bleak Yorkshire moors, of which she had read descriptions ; but, on the contrary, as they went farther north the weather appeared milder, only a mournful whistling wind arose, and heavy drops of rain mixed with sleet dashed against the carriage windows, and shut out any view there might have been.

Rosamond was silent and abstracted ; she

had scarcely spoken since the beginning of the journey ; and Elsie's spirits, which had been high when she started, fell in sympathy with her companion's mood, until, as the short daylight waned, she became quite miserable, and began to torment herself with all kinds of fears. She wished she knew what Rosamond was thinking of ; what made her look so pale and strange ? Was she thinking of Mona ? perhaps that was it, and Elsie's thoughts went back to the nursery at Alkerton. She wished she knew how Lionel was ; perhaps he was going to be very ill ; perhaps he would die, and she had disregarded his last wishes by coming to Seathwaite. Above all, she wished she could hear from David ; and for the first time an alarm for David's safety possessed her. The *Corinzean* coach ! the vision of Christmas Eve flashed into her mind with a new and terrible meaning ; Elsie turned faint and sick at the sudden foolish panic, and instinctively put out her hands to clutch something. Rosamond did not notice the gesture in the

gathering dusk, and they were approaching their journey's end.

When they reached the station at Seathwaite, a respectable elderly man-servant opened the carriage door, and helped down his mistress and her belongings in grave silence.

'Are there any news?' she demanded of him abruptly.

'No news, my lady,' he answered, and looked doubtfully at Elsie. He helped her also to descend, and looked round the carriage to see if they had left anything behind. Finding a crumpled-up newspaper, which Elsie had dropped, he straightened it out and presented it to her with extreme gravity, and, as she fancied, a look of melancholy reproach.

The park gates were just outside the village, and they drove up a long avenue, winding amongst clumps of firs, to a large gloomy-looking stone house with a pillared portico. The body of the house was probably about a hundred years old, but on each

side of the entrance was a huge new-built wing, of depressing regularity of outline. Rosamond led the way through the entrance-hall, which was lined with stuffed birds and beasts and huge elks' horns, through a billiard-room and a large library to a smaller sitting-room, where a bright fire was burning, and tea was laid out on a low table. Here she left Elsie, and returned to the outer room to speak to Atkinson, the man who had met them at the station, and who was Sir Roger's confidential servant, and had taken the lead in the search which had been set on foot. She remained a considerable time away, and in the interval Elsie looked round her. The room she sat in was well furnished, and Rosamond's taste showed itself in its arrangement; and yet to Elsie's eye it had a somewhat dreary look, with its high ceiling and rather gaunt walls. The whole place looked inexpressibly dull and melancholy. 'No wonder,' thought the girl, 'that Rosamond hates it. I do not think that any furniture, or even any people, would

make it cheerful. Poor Rosamond! I wish she would come; what can be the matter?’

She waited some time longer, and then Rosamond came in with a weary step, and sat her down before the fire, apparently forgetful of Elsie's presence. After a minute Elsie spoke to her, asking her if she would not take off her heavy furs, and Rosamond answered gently, ‘Yes, dear, yes,’ but without seeming to take in what was said. After a while she rose with a sigh, and hastily taking off her coat she flung it on a chair, and turned to the table, saying, ‘Well, I suppose we must have some food.’

‘Atkinson has nothing new to tell me,’ she said by and by. ‘Everything has been done, it seems, which can be done. They have searched all round the place; he has been telling me about it——’ and she shivered slightly. ‘He is going to-morrow to Linton to make inquiries; nothing more can be done to-night.’

There was no need to dwell upon the subject of Sir Roger's disappearance, and they

both tried to dismiss it and talk of other things, but without much success, and for the most part they kept silence. At Rosamond's request Elsie shared her room with her at night; each lay quiet for fear of disturbing the other, but neither slept much, and the next day Rosamond confessed to feeling tired.

‘But I have a great many things to see to,’ she said, ‘and you, dear child, look pale. Go out and take a walk; the fresh air will do you good; and take Cæsar, the big mastiff, with you, he is as sensible as a man.’

Elsie obeyed, and fearlessly unchained the great dog, who at once took her under his protection, and walked by her side with a condescending air, usurping most of the foot-path, and insisting on carrying her umbrella in his mouth, dropping it from time to time, but pushing her away whenever she tried to pick it up again. Having explored the garden, Elsie instinctively took her way towards the open fields; she rather disliked the look of the village, but as Cæsar seemed to think

it the right place to go, she yielded to his solicitations for the sake of peace, and walked down the avenue in that direction. She had nearly reached the gate when she met a female figure in a brown ulster, carrying a basket, at the sight of whom Cæsar bristled all over with indignation, and the woman, or lady, for so it was, uttered an exclamation and sprang towards her.

‘The dog is quite gentle,’ said Elsie, thinking she was frightened. ‘Cæsar, come here, sir!’

‘I *beg* your pardon!’ said the stranger volubly; ‘I thought, when I saw the dog, that you were Lady Seathwaite. Are you staying with her? I have *just* heard she had returned, and was coming to see if I could be useful, or if she would like to see Mr. Maddon. I am Mrs. Maddon,’ she added.

‘Thank you very much,’ said Elsie, who had already guessed that this zealous little woman, with her charitable-looking basket, was the clergyman’s wife. ‘Lady Seathwaite only came back last night—she is pretty well.

She is—a good deal occupied this morning ; but I will give her your kind message.’

Elsie blushed as she said this, not liking to be ungracious, but anxious at any cost to save Rosamond from a troublesome visitor. Mrs. Maddon did seem a little hurt.

‘If you think Lady Seathwaite will not see me this morning, I had better spare myself the walk. My time is precious ; I must go and see a sick man. *Good-bye*—or were you going to the village?’

‘I was only taking a walk,’ said Elsie ; ‘we might go to the gate together.’

‘*Poor* Lady Seathwaite!’ said Mrs. Maddon, as they walked on. ‘I *do* feel for her. Has *nothing* been heard of Sir Roger?’

‘No,’ said Elsie, ‘nothing.’

‘Ah!’ said Mrs. Maddon, with a sympathetic gasp. ‘And—excuse me—*does* she realise it?’

‘Realise what?’ asked Elsie.

‘That he has made away with himself,’ replied Mrs. Maddon, lowering her voice. ‘Ah! I fear there cannot be a doubt about

it. Day and night I see him before me—his lifeless body. So does Mr. Maddon; he anticipates the very worst.'

As she spoke Mrs. Maddon cast up her eyes apprehensively to the church steeple, as if she expected to see the lost baronet dangling from it. By this time they had reached the gate, which Elsie unfastened.

'I must go back now,' she said, 'good-bye.'

'And you will be *sure* to send for me if I can be of the least use,' said Mrs. Maddon, wringing her hand hard and looking into her face with eager, earnest eyes. 'She ought *not* to be alone; if her parents do not come to her——'

'They would come at once,' said Elsie, 'if anything happened; and she is not quite alone, you know, while I am here.'

But Mrs. Maddon only shook her head a little, breathed another '*Good-bye*,' and scuttled off with her basket.

Elsie walked home thoughtfully, musing on what Mrs. Maddon had said. It was

possible, of course, that Sir Roger had committed suicide, indeed Elsie knew that that was what his wife dreaded; but to have the doubt put into words made it seem more real; she was more than ever glad that she had not admitted the visitor.

‘She is a maddening woman,’ observed Rosamond, when Elsie told her of her adventure. ‘She is well named. You did quite right to turn her; not that I would have seen her if she had come.’

‘She meant kindly,’ said Elsie.

‘Don’t talk of her!’ said Rosamond impatiently, adding, after a minute, ‘Elsie, I have had a telegram whilst you were out—at least Atkinson has. They think they have found—traces.’

‘Where?’

‘A porter at Bramley station declares he has seen him—at least some one answering to the description. Atkinson is to start by the next train, in half an hour’s time, so we ought to hear something before night.’

All that afternoon the rain came down in

torrents, and Rosamond, though she walked restlessly about the room and often went to the window, did not propose to go out. In the evening the wind increased to a gale, which continued all night long ; it howled and moaned round the house, making the windows rattle, and disturbing the sleepers in their beds. No message came that night, and in the morning there was merely an unsatisfactory one from Atkinson, to say he was doing his best to follow up the tracks which had been found.

Rosamond looked more pale and hollow-eyed, and Elsie began to be really anxious about her ; she seemed so strange and restless. She was very gentle and affectionate to Elsie, but the girl could see that she had a constant desire to get rid of her and wander in the woods alone. It was one of those dark, gray days in mid-winter, when the air feels dead and the clouds hang low, as if too heavy to bear their own weight. There was no rain nor snow, only a moaning wind, the remains of the late gale, which sounded dis-

mally from the fir-woods, and seemed to Elsie's excited ears to be bringing something with it, some new trouble—some strange unknown terror.

She would not let Rosamond go out alone in the afternoon, but clung to her persistently, in spite of her friend's evident desire to wander by herself.

'Shall we take Cæsar?' said Rosamond, as she shut the hall door.

Elsie perceived a dissuasive inflection in her voice, and answered 'N—no, Rose, I don't think we need; he was out this morning.'

'He gets so bored in the woods,' said Rosamond, relieved. 'He likes best to go to the station and see the trains come in; and though he is fond of me, I think he prefers the stationmaster.'

It struck Elsie as strange that Rosamond should be so evidently relieved at not having to take Cæsar, nor could she understand why her friend always tried to keep a little in front of her as she walked rapidly through

the wood, stopping sometimes to walk round some tree, and then again hurrying forward. By and by they came to a pool of water at the farther edge of the wood ; a dark, black-looking pool, with a steep bank at one side. Here Rosamond stopped Elsie with a quick, imperative sign. 'Stay you there,' she said ; and mounting the bank she looked down eagerly into the water. Elsie now saw how she expected, yet feared, to find her husband's body ; and a great horror and pity took possession of her. She sprang up the bank, and with her arm round her friend, looked down too into the dark water ; but there was nothing.

'Come home with me, my dear, come home,' she said. 'There is nothing here.'

Rosamond submitted in silence, and Elsie led her home, not letting go her hand till they reached the house. All that evening they sat together, listening to the ceaseless moaning of the wind, waiting and expecting—what ? Elsie dared not think, she could only do what seemed best at the present moment.

These days passed like years; it seemed almost as if it were unlikely that the sun would ever shine again, or anything happen to break the terrible silence. She thought of David as of a far-off dream; even Alkerton, which she had left so lately, was indistinct to her, like a place she had lived in many many years ago, when she was young and free from care.

That night passed like the two former, except that they both slept more, from sheer exhaustion. In the morning Rosamond seemed so weary that Elsie persuaded her to stay in bed, and brought her some breakfast herself. After this she went downstairs and exerted herself to write a long letter to David. She had nearly finished when she heard a stir, and a ring at the bell; then the butler came in to say that Mr. Maddon had called, and was waiting to see Lady Seathwaite. The man spoke in a peculiarly grave subdued tone, and Elsie looked at him questioningly.

‘Mr. Maddon—that is the clergyman? Has he come—why has he come?’

‘I could not say, miss,’ said the man uneasily. ‘Mr. Maddon is a very silent gentleman; but he says he must see her ladyship.’

Elsie thought a minute, then went upstairs to Rosamond, whom she found nearly dressed.

‘Rosamond, Mr. Maddon has come, and is asking for you. Shall I see him? or would you rather speak to him yourself?’

‘I expected this,’ said Rosamond calmly. ‘Tell them to show Mr. Maddon into the library, Elsie; I will see him alone.’

Sir Roger Seathwaite had been found dead early that morning by some labourers; drowned in an old quarry four or five miles from the house. The place had been searched before, when he first disappeared; it was evident that he must have wandered away and returned, and it was impossible to say whether his death had or had not been intentional. He appeared to have fallen over a rock into the quarry, and might have missed his footing in the dark; on the other hand, there were no marks to show that he had

fallen over the edge, and tried to save himself. It was certain, from the evidence of Atkinson, who returned from his unsuccessful search soon afterwards, that for some time previous Sir Roger had been completely insane. The coroner's inquest, which was held later, returned a verdict of accidental death.

Lady Seathwaite received the news of her husband's fate with perfect composure, displaying neither grief nor surprise. She listened to all that Mr. Maddon had to say, and after he left she went to Elsie, and quietly told her the particulars. When Elsie proposed to send for her parents, she assented, though indifferently, adding with a sort of relief, 'This is Saturday, they cannot be here until Monday.'

When her husband's dead body was being brought in, and Elsie would fain have kept the knowledge from her, she knew perfectly what the heavy footsteps meant, and waited calmly till they ceased. Then she left the room, forbidding her friend to follow her, and passing through the awe-struck group of

servants, she stood and looked at the dead face, which was less repulsive in death than she had often seen it in life, when it had been swollen and purple with drink, or distorted with passion.

‘It looks at least like the remains of a man, and not like a wild beast.’ So Rosamond thought as she gazed upon it; then making a sign to Atkinson to cover it up, she walked away.

Elsie met her at the door. Rosamond was so reasonable that her friend felt she had a right to have her wishes attended to, but Elsie could not but feel anxious about her; this extreme calmness and reserve seemed so unnatural. It did not give way until the next day, when Mr. Maddon called again after service, and inquired if the widow would see him.

‘Tell Mr. Maddon I cannot see him,’ she said peremptorily, when the message was brought her.

‘Do you not think it might be better to see him?’ asked Elsie wistfully.

‘I will not,’ cried Rosamond with flashing eyes. ‘The man is a fool,’ she went on, breaking into angry tears. ‘He told me yesterday to take comfort—why, do you think? because Roger had perhaps found mercy at the last moment, and had gone to heaven. *He* gone to heaven, poor wretch! what would he do in heaven? he would be miserable,’ and she laughed hysterically.

‘Don’t be shocked at me, Elsie; God will have mercy on my poor Roger, for I don’t think that he could help it. I don’t believe in hell—not in Mr. Maddon’s kind of hell—I don’t think any one is bad enough for that; but poor Roger in heaven—no! And I don’t want to be condoled with,’ she went on. ‘I may be a wicked woman, Elsie, but I am not a hypocrite. I am not sorry he is dead—how can I be? But oh! I am thankful it was not I who found him.’

Elsie cried with her for a while; it was a relief to her, and she was glad to see Rosamond’s tears. She thought it best to encourage her to say what was in her mind.

‘You thought you knew where he was, then?’ she said.

‘I felt as if I must look for him,’ replied Rosamond. ‘I did not want to find him—I was dreadfully afraid of finding him, but it was my duty, I suppose; it was what I came home for. Do you remember advising me not to take Cæsar? well, I was pleased at that, for I thought Cæsar would be sure to find him, and you would have to see’—she stopped shuddering. ‘One did not know how—but that is over. Child! do not you get ill; that is all I ask.’

As evening came on Elsie soothed her as best she could, and tried to prevent her getting excited, fearing she would not sleep. She felt the responsibility a good deal, as Rosamond laughed at the idea of seeing the doctor, and positively refused to have any one near her but Elsie; but once Rosamond had begun to talk, she would not be kept quiet, and poured out to her friend the whole sad history of her married life.

‘But you liked him at first?’ Elsie asked her. ‘He was not so bad at first, surely?’

‘Liked him! no, I never liked him,’ said Rosamond. ‘And he was just as bad at first, except that he was sane enough, and did not want to kill himself or me.’

‘But if you did not like him, I don’t understand——’

Elsie stopped.

‘Why I married him? neither do I now. But I was very young and very silly, and I cared for somebody else—but he had never written, and they persuaded me he wanted to get rid of me. It was a lie of course. But I was quite in despair and did not care what became of me, and I married Roger just because I was bothered into it.’

‘Poor Rose!’ said Elsie. ‘And was he cruel to you?’

‘Oh, he was kind in his way—sometimes, and at other times he was quite, quite mad.’

‘And did he threaten your life?’

‘Yes, and then he had to be shut up. I did not mind for myself, only for Mona; I

could generally keep him in order unless he was very bad. But I am very, *very* thankful he is dead !'

So was Elsie, and she devoutly echoed the thanksgiving, at the same time inwardly hoping that Rose would not express this sentiment in public, though from her experience of her friend she thought it was extremely likely that she would.

CHAPTER VI.

‘*Cap.* . . . Well, Wednesday is too soon,
O’ Thursday let it be ;—o’ Thursday, tell her
She shall be married to this noble earl :—
We’ll keep no great ado :—a friend, or two :—
For hark you, Tybalt being slain so late,
It may be thought we held him carelessly,
Being our kinsman, if we revel much . . .
But what say you to Thursday?’

ELSIE looked forward hopefully to the arrival of Rosamond’s parents, thinking that a mother would of course know what to do, and supply all her lack of experience. They arrived on the Monday evening, and Elsie turned away from Rosamond’s first meeting with her mother to speak to Sir Richard Mortimer, who was a fine-looking elderly man, with a pompous, dictatorial manner. He was polite to Elsie, and said that his daughter was under very great obligations

to her ; but he fretted and fumed with indignation over the whole business, and found fault with the way in which everything had been managed.

Poor Lady Mary clasped her daughter in her arms and cried, and would not leave off until she was peremptorily ordered by her husband to do so : she had had a long journey, and seemed tired and upset. She was something like Lady Eleanor in appearance, but was much older looking ; there was really ten years' difference in their ages, and Lady Mary had a careworn look which made her seem older still. She was thin, too, and shrunken, and had had none of her sister's stately grace of outline, and her complexion, instead of being the rich creamy tint of Lady Eleanor's, had become sallow and unhealthy ; but she carried herself well, and had a certain air of distinction.

Rosamond made an effort to bear her mother's lamentations patiently, pitied her fatigue, and begged Elsie to see that she was made comfortable ; and Elsie found her

cares increased rather than lessened by the arrival of these relatives. Lady Mary appealed to her in everything, and was utterly helpless with Rosamond. The only good she did was to arrange about her daughter's mourning, and that of the household; and this was not accomplished without a great deal of unnecessary bustle, Rosamond being dragged into every consultation, and even called upon to settle what material should be used for the maids' caps.

The subject which next came uppermost in Lady Mary's mind was whether her daughter Constance's marriage should be put off, and for how long.

'Sir Richard does not see why it should be put off,' she said to Elsie, 'and Constance will not say one thing or another. It was fixed for the 20th, and I think a quiet wedding then—but Blanche says it would be disgraceful to have it before June. I do think Easter would be quite long enough for them to wait, but if Rose has any feeling—do you think she has, Miss Ross?'

‘I don’t think so, Lady Mary,’ said Elsie. ‘Indeed, I am sure she has not.’

‘You see, it *is* most inconvenient,’ said Lady Mary. ‘Everything fixed and settled. The cake is ordered—that will keep, of course. And the flowers were ordered—bouquets of forced lily of the valley,—a charming idea, was it not? and really at Easter one does not know what flowers they could have.’

Elsie tried to think, but in vain.

‘I can think of nothing but arum lilies,’ said Lady Mary despairingly, ‘and they could not carry them in their hands. They would be pretty to decorate the church though,’ she added, struck with a bright thought, ‘very pretty and appropriate. Azaleas? not very pretty. Maréchal Niel roses? she had set her heart upon white.’

‘Narcissus?’ suggested Elsie. ‘Pheasant’s eye?’

‘They have a dreadfully strong smell,’ said Lady Mary despondingly, ‘but a good idea; thank you, Miss Ross. I really do

not know that one could have it before Easter.'

Rosamond entered as the last words were said.

'Have what, mamma?' she asked languidly. 'Oh, Constance's marriage, I suppose. When was it to be?'

'Oh, Rose, my dear, no one would ever dream of it if you have the least feeling about it; indeed I think it must be put off. The 20th would never do—I really do not know *when* to have it.'

Rosamond walked to the window, lifted up a corner of the blind and looked out; then she came back to her mother.

'Well, mamma, if you ask my advice, I should say put it off until Easter, for decency's sake; after that, have it by all means; I have no feelings in the matter. I merely say this because you are fond of doing the correct thing—as far as I am concerned you might have it to-morrow.'

'Well, well, my dear,' said Lady Mary fretfully, 'I only want to spare you as much

as possible. I hope you have been lying down. Miss Ross, pray persuade her to lie down—she will need all her strength for to-morrow.’

Several of the relations came that evening to attend the funeral on the morrow ; among whom was the new baronet, Sir George Seathwaite, Roger’s cousin. Mr. Fitzgerald was another of the guests ; and the sight of him brought Elsie back to everyday life more than anything which had happened since she came to Seathwaite. He said that Lionel was better and able to leave his room, which Elsie was very glad to hear.

The funeral was over at last, and the legal proceedings satisfactorily concluded. The lawyer believed Sir Roger Seathwaite to have left no will ; but by the marriage settlements the widow was amply provided for, and Mona inherited a considerable fortune, though the title and estates passed to a cousin. The reading of the documents was soon over, and the guests were about

to disperse. Elsie heard Sir Richard bidding them 'good-bye in a loud cheerful tone, and presently they came in to make their adieux to Lady Mary. Elsie could not help smiling at the expression of Sir George's face; he was a merry little man with a natural tendency to whistle and hum tunes from sheer exuberance of spirits, and had with difficulty composed himself to a decent solemnity during the late melancholy ceremony. Now he was like a boy just let loose from school, and Elsie looked at him, half expecting to see him turn a somersault out at the door, when the lawyer entered hastily, saying, 'Gentlemen, I must beg your attention for a few moments longer. A will has been found.'

Sir George's face lengthened considerably, and they all returned in a saddened manner to the library, where a very long discussion was held, after which most of the guests took their departure; but Sir George and the lawyer, having missed their train, were obliged to remain at Seathwaite till the next day.

By and by Sir Richard was heard storming and stamping about the house. 'Rosamond! where is Rosamond?' cried he, entering the room where the ladies were sitting.

'Dear Richard, she has only just gone to rest,' said Lady Mary. 'Pray do not disturb the poor child.'

'Rest! what the devil—? is she ill then?' cried Sir Richard. 'Tell her I must see her at once. She can prove it's all nonsense. The man was mad—as mad as a March hare.'

Elsie went to fetch Rosamond, whose quick ears had already heard her name called many times, but who was determined not to stir till she was sent for.

'Some new calamity, I suppose,' she said, when Elsie had repeated Sir Richard's message. 'Well, Elsie, you must leave me to fight it out, you can't help me, dear. Go out and take a walk; that will do you more good than anything.'

Elsie went reluctantly, but she knew she was best out of the way, and she compelled

herself to walk twice to the park gate and back again, which would occupy a whole hour; yet when she came in the sound of voices told her that the discussion, whatever it was, was still going on. She feared Rosamond would be quite worn out, but that evening her friend insisted on telling her the whole story.

‘My dear,’ she said, ‘you may be glad I sent you out. No sooner were you gone than papa came storming and raging, and saying I must prove this, that, and the other. I had to go to the library with him and George and Mr. Hunter, who had found the will stuck behind a drawer which had been searched before, and they read it to me. He threatened me once that he would make a will like that, but I did not believe that he really would or could, and I defied him to do it; but it seems to be all correct and formal.’

‘And what was it?’ asked Elsie anxiously. ‘I thought it was not in his power to do you any real harm.’

‘Well, no, but he did his best. He hated his cousin George too, but he could not prevent his getting the title or the lands; however, he has burdened the estate with ever so many useless legacies; one, amongst others, to build public-houses in all the neighbouring parishes. This is to annoy George, because he is a great temperance man.’

‘And is that all?’ asked Elsie.

‘Oh, there is a provision that I—if I marry again before Mona is of age—I am not to see her or have any intercourse with her. If she lives with me, she forfeits her fortune.’

‘No wonder Sir Richard was angry,’ said Elsie indignantly.

‘Yes, he was in a fearful frame of mind about it. Poor George tried to keep him quiet, he thought I would be hurt; though the public-houses must have come rather hard upon him.’

‘But they are going to dispute it, are they not? it will not stand?’

‘No, I think they will be able to dispose of it on the ground of insanity; though—mind you—I don’t think Roger was mad at the moment he made it—it was so like him. Papa cannot stand my saying that before those other two; *that* made him very angry. I knew it would.’

Elsie could not help sharing Sir Richard’s opinion that it would have been better left unsaid; there was a vindictiveness in Rosamond’s disposition which she was unable to enter into. She looked very grave and troubled over the affair of the will, and took an opportunity of asking Lady Mary whether she thought it could possibly hold good. The latter answered that the three gentlemen were unanimous in thinking that it could be proved invalid, but that this might involve some tedious law business, especially as one of the trustees seemed disposed to be troublesome.

When a few more days had passed the Mortimers returned to Wynchcombe, taking Rosamond with them. All joined in cordially

inviting Elsie to accompany them ; and she was much tempted to do so, as she had grown to cling greatly to Rose, and dreaded the idea of parting with her. It was hard to resist her friends' entreaties, but Elsie considered that Rosamond had no real need of her now, as she was going back to her sisters and to Mona ; and she thought it was high time to return to Aunt Caroline, whose letters showed that she was very much hurt and offended with her niece for going to Seathwaite at all. Elsie therefore parted from her friends at Paddington Station, for they all went up to London together ; and about the middle of January found herself once more at Chippingham.

CHAPTER VII.

‘We looked for peace, but no good came ; and for a time of health, and behold trouble !’

MRS. LINDSAY found it difficult to forgive the offence of which her niece had been guilty by her bold and independent conduct. Such a spirit she considered extremely unbecoming in a young female ; and when Elsie returned to her pale and languid, worn out in mind and body by all that she had gone through, Mrs. Lindsay lost no opportunity of impressing upon her that such were the invariable but bitter fruits of disobedience. She would hear nothing of Rosamond and her trials, with the recital of which Elsie tried to soften her ; Lady Seathwaite was one of those whose existence she utterly and entirely disapproved of. As to the late

baronet, she considered it highly improper that a young unmarried woman should even be aware that such a person had ever existed ; therefore lectures and exhortations were now the order of the day.

As Elsie drooped, however, from day to day, cried when her aunt scolded her, and had no appetite, Mrs. Lindsay began to see that her niece was far from well. The doctor and Parkins were called in to prescribe ; tonics and kind treatment were next administered ; and as the spring flowers came out and the days grew longer, the girl began to revive a little.

David's letters could not but cheer her, they were so full of joyful expectation. He reminded her that the two years' probation was drawing to a close ; he had no doubt of being able to come home in autumn on special leave ; and, lest Elsie should interpose any delays, he took the precaution of writing to Aunt Caroline, urging her to make preparations for the marriage, which was to take place in October. Mrs. Lindsay under-

took this task with the greatest zeal, and Elsie's wishes in the matter were entirely overruled. The Laird seemed to take it as a matter of course that his daughter's marriage should take place at Rossie, and Elsie herself had no other thought; but Mrs. Lindsay eagerly pointed out to her how impossible this was. The General, who was now very feeble in health, would be quite unequal to the long journey; she herself would be greatly tried by it; so would Miss Maynard; while it was evident that the wild and inhospitable region in which Rossie was situated would afford no suitable accommodation for David's parents. Elsie's wishes should be consulted in all reasonable matters; her father must of course be present to give her away, and Mrs. Ross should be invited to accompany him. Elsie acquiesced passively, and left the management of everything in her aunt's hands, only expressing a strong wish to go home that summer to see her father, since she might not be married from Rossie. But this request Aunt Caroline did not see

fit to grant. The Laird at length, overwhelmed by the epistolary eloquence of Mrs. Lindsay, had consented to come to Chippingham with Euphemia, and grace his daughter's nuptials; Elsie would therefore, Aunt Caroline argued, see quite enough of him then; it was highly undesirable that she should be absent at a time when she was a source of so much pleasure and interest to others, and when her dresses might at any moment require to be fitted on.

Once more Elsie dully submitted, and, amidst all the bustle which Aunt Caroline raised, she moved about like one in a dream. A strange feeling of unreality possessed her, and it was not until she heard that David was actually on his way home, that she could bring herself to believe she was so soon to see him again. It was scarcely a shock to her at the time, when the startling news came, that David had only reached Suez to be recalled—that, the Chamberlain mission having failed, war with Shere Ali had been declared, and no soldier could be spared from his post.

Mrs. Lindsay was naturally both disappointed and apprehensive for her nephew's safety, but, her first agitation over, she bore up bravely on Elsie's account, and was also disposed to take her husband's view of the matter, for the General was cheerful and even exultant.

‘This is a grand chance for Davie,’ he would say, ‘a fine opportunity of getting on. Shouldn’t wonder if he saw some very pretty fighting. I remember when I was out there in ’41——’ and the General launched forth gleefully into reminiscences of his old campaigns. If Mrs. Lindsay sighed a little over the dangers of war, he scouted the idea of anything happening to his nephew. ‘No fear of Davie not casting up—*he* always falls on his feet.’

But all these assurances failed to inspire Elsie with courage; she trembled whenever the post came in, and could not conceal her agitation at the least mention of fighting. Mrs. Lindsay first reasoned with her gently, and then took her to task seriously for want

of faith, but Elsie said she could not help it. Perhaps the scenes she had passed through at Seathwaite had tried her nerves too much ; perhaps the shadow of her coming grief was already over her. For Elsie's fears were but too well founded, she never saw her lover again.

The winter passed slowly away, and anxiety gave way to thankfulness as news came from time to time of the success and gallantry of the British troops in making their way up the Afghan passes. Every one said the campaign would soon be at an end, and David was still safe. It was not till spring that the stroke, which Elsie had felt hanging over her for so long, came at last in its full force. David was killed in an action on the Cabul river, the report said that Lieutenant Lindsay was cut down while heading a charge into a dense mass of the enemy clustered round a standard, which he had succeeded in taking when he fell. He was dead when his comrades lifted him up, and no soothing message was conveyed to his

friends to tell them that he remembered them in his last moments. Death had probably been instantaneous ; that was all the comfort they received, except the knowledge that his name was spoken of with honour, and that his brother officers sincerely mourned his loss.

This calamity fell like a thunderbolt upon the quiet household at the Elms, and Elsie was the only one who bore the news at first with outward calmness. She did not speak a word or shed a tear when the news was told her ; but as days went on, and Mrs. Lindsay first, and then the General, began to recover a little from the first shock of their grief, Elsie's face remained still and hopeless, and she seemed to have no thought or care for anything in this world. When they spoke to her of resignation and submission to the Divine will, she assented, saying gently that she had no cause to complain ; that she was no worse off than many others, and that she had been very happy ; and then she would entreat them with tears to leave her alone, and to have patience with her.

She sat by herself as much as possible, shrinking from sight with the instinct of some wounded wild creature, which tries to creep into a hole to die. But Elsie did not die, although at first she hoped and prayed to do so ; by little and little she struggled back to life. There is no need to dwell on the sufferings of this poor heart ; indeed, few are so happy as to be unable to comprehend them in some measure.

The news of David's death came in April, and by the end of May Mrs. Lindsay, dismayed at her niece's low state of health and spirits, was willing to give up her most cherished prejudices for the sake of doing her good. During those first sad weeks nothing could have been more tender and considerate than her treatment of the girl. She behaved throughout with the greatest tact and forbearance, and did not let Miss Maynard tease her by well-meant condolences and caresses.

Mrs. Lindsay now offered to send Elsie home to Rossie for a change, or even to take

her herself if necessary, which was really a most self-sacrificing proposal ; but Elsie, to her surprise, refused to go. 'You are very good, Aunt Caroline,' she said, 'but not yet—I do not think I could. Let me stay with you.'

Rosamond had written, first to Elsie, and then to Mrs. Lindsay, inquiring very anxiously for her friend, and asking if she might come to her, but this also Elsie declined. 'I cannot speak about it,' she said. 'Give me time, Aunt Caroline—just a little time. I will do better by and by.'

By degrees, as the summer went on, she attained calmness ; then a faint cheerfulness and interest in everyday things, which was at first assumed, then real ; but she showed no wish to vary her life by any change, and she kept her thoughts and feelings to herself. Mrs. Lindsay was not satisfied, and she and Miss Maynard now began to consult together, and to shake their heads over her.

'There is a reserve,' Mrs. Lindsay would say, 'a shutting up of the heart against sympathy, which I feel to be really wrong ; and

yet she is perfectly tranquil now, and much stronger in health. If we suffer this impenetrability to grow upon her, hers will become a self-absorbed, a self-centred, and an unsympathising character!’ and she looked fiercely at Miss Maynard, as if she dared her to contradict her.

‘She does not care to speak about dear Ernest’s sad loss,’ observed Miss Maynard mournfully, ‘but perhaps it recalls her own sorrow too vividly.’

‘Nothing of the kind, Cecilia! I saw her amusing herself with the dogs not an hour after we heard the announcement.’

Mr. Maynard’s young wife had lately died, in giving birth to a daughter, and this sad and startling event had once more called out all Mrs. Lindsay’s sympathy and goodwill towards Ernest. She had forgiven the marriage in a formal sort of way, but could not make a friend of Mrs. Maynard, who was a foolish flighty young creature; still, as the widower seemed overcome with grief at his loss, she was unremitting in her attentions

and kind messages ; and the dead wife acquired a sort of sanctity in her eyes. She would have adopted the baby, had it not been instantly claimed by its mother's relations ; and she was quite annoyed with Elsie for not shedding tears over it, and pressing it to her heart, as Miss Maynard had done, when she was first introduced to it. There seemed no use in expecting her niece and Mr. Maynard to console each other, neither showed the least wish to do so, and Mrs. Lindsay was quite at a loss for mental occupation, until, about the beginning of October, she received news from Alkerton.

Up to this time they had not heard a word about Lady Eleanor, directly or indirectly ; Mrs. Lindsay had not given her much thought, and Elsie had not spoken on the subject. But now a letter came from Mr. Fitzgerald, asking leave to carry off Miss Ross for a visit to his wife, who had expressed a great wish to see her, and intimating that he might be expected at the Elms the following day.

When Mr. Fitzgerald came, he received a chastened welcome from Mrs. Lindsay, the black ribbons on whose cap trembled with emotion as she conducted him to her boudoir for a confidential interview. The behaviour of the visitor was no less appropriate; he expressed himself in long well-chosen words, and now that he had exerted himself to pay this visit, which nothing but his wife's express command could have led him to undertake, he behaved heroically, and won golden opinions from his hostess.

'That is a man I respect,' she said emphatically to Miss Maynard in the evening. 'He has feeling, and he has principle. How thankful I feel that poor dear Eleanor has been vouchsafed such a helpmeet. What support must he not yield—what guidance!'

Miss Maynard turned up her eyes, and uttered an ecstatic gasp.

'He tells me,' pursued Mrs. Lindsay, 'that his wife's state of mind causes him very grave anxiety. Uncontrolled as poor dear Eleanor's feelings always were, she has

given way to them, it appears, to a painful, to a culpable extent, and has reduced herself to a state of—in fact,’ said Mrs. Lindsay, waving her hand, ‘Mr. Fitzgerald had to call in the doctor.’

‘And his opinion?’ inquired Miss Maynard mildly.

‘He prescribed change of air and scene. Mr. Fitzgerald would have taken her to Brighton, to the Continent, anywhere—Eleanor would not move. Then as she was not to be crossed or thwarted—that doctor must have been most injudicious as well as weak—she of course continued without any improvement, until the other day she took a fancy that she would like to see dear Elsie. Her husband, always on the alert to anticipate her wishes, came—flew’—and Mrs. Lindsay spread out her arms, to illustrate the manner in which one might suppose Mr. Fitzgerald to have been wafted to the Elms—‘flew hither on the wings of love, and to-morrow returns, bearing our darling with him.’

‘To-morrow!’ exclaimed Miss Maynard aghast. ‘Then you have consented to dear Elsie’s——’

‘Undoubtedly,’ said Mrs. Lindsay, folding her arms with majesty. ‘Where there is a work of mercy to be done, I *never* hesitate.’

The wish which Lady Eleanor had expressed touched and pleased Elsie exceedingly, and she felt an eagerness to go, which she restrained for fear of hurting her aunt, but the latter was so occupied with Mr. Fitzgerald and his principles, that she never even thought of consulting Elsie’s feelings in the matter.

If Mr. Fitzgerald had flown to Chippingham on the wings of love, he certainly did not fly back on them, for Elsie had never before met with such a troublesome travelling companion. He fidgeted and complained incessantly; quarrelled with all the porters; threatened to bring an action against the railway company whenever he did not see his luggage; and gave his

companion no peace till they arrived at Alkerton.

When they entered the house Elsie caught sight of Lady Eleanor's tall figure coming out to meet them, and stayed a little behind, while Mr. Fitzgerald hastened to tell his wife how ill he was, and how much the journey had upset him, but Lady Eleanor took no notice of him at all except to put him aside with one hand; she went straight up to Elsie, put her arms round the girl and kissed her, then led her to her room without a word. 'I knew you would come,' she said, when they were alone together.

Elsie noticed how her face had grown thinner, and her voice had lost its ring. 'You have been ill, Lady Eleanor,' she said softly.

'Oh yes, and they have been tormenting me with doctors,' she answered, still in the same spiritless voice. 'Did your aunt make a fuss about your coming? how did you get on with Frederick?'

'Aunt Caroline liked me to come——'

began Elsie, and stopped, for Lady Eleanor did not seem to desire an answer. She sighed, looked vacantly round, and then left the room, saying she supposed she must attend to Frederick.

END OF VOL. II.

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